

FIFTY WAYS



Brenda Kelsey

a Star Trek
fanzine

FIFTY WAYS

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A ScoTpress publication

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Printing: Warped Out Publications Inc.

Distracting: Shona (it's at least thirty seconds since you last spoke to me!)

FIFTY WAYS, in which Spock, about to enter pon farr, is helped by Joanna McCoy, is put out by ScoTpress and is available from

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FIFTY WAYS

He slipped in through the half closed doors and stopped, quite still, between one step and the next, just managing to avoid crashing into the steward. He rocked slightly with the effort of controlling the sudden change of pace from headlong flight to instant non-motion. The doors whispered closed and sealed themselves behind him. He fought his body for the breath to enable him to speak without panting.

"Good evening."

The steward who had witnessed his arrival and had been watching warily, relaxed slightly and grinned, the action transforming his features in a way that took some of Spock's all-too-scant control away.

So like Jim. Have all Humans suddenly developed this ability, or is it just that I never permitted myself to notice it before?

"Good evening, sir. May I show you to your seat? Ah - your late arrival... That is, I'm afraid that your reserved seat has been given to another traveller."

"I am aware that by not occupying my reserved seat ten minutes before the posted departure time I have lost the right to claim it. The fault is entirely mine. No apologies are necessary."

He sounded all too breathless to his own acute hearing. The grin on the young man's face widened.

"We had six cancellations tonight and filled every seat immediately, but a seat was held for you. You had paid for it, and whether you use it or not is your choice. The only vacant seat is at the back of the cabin. Will you follow me, please?"

The steward reached out a hand to steady himself as the passenger transport began moving into the lift-off area. Spock swayed with the motion, his hands occupied with the travel bags.

"May I take your bags?"

Spock handed one, the lighter of the two, over into the steward's grasp. His eyes widened as the weight of the seemingly normal bag relayed along his nerves to his brain. He hefted the bag, then offered his free hand for the other.

"I believe that I had best retain this one. It weights nine point seven kilos more than that one, and its contents could suffer harm if it were dropped."

The late arrival's posture, his speech and his hooded clothing registered suddenly. The steward added two and two and found that he had calculated pi. He straightened. This tall, elegantly dressed man had to be a Vulcan.

"Will you come this way, please, sir?"

Spock followed the steward through the packed cabin, absently noting the deft touches of a master designer who had contrived to squeeze in the maximum number of passengers whilst retaining for them an impression of luxury and comfort. The chatter rose and fell around him, his passage drawing many curious glances from the seated crowds who were already

prepared for the departure of the shuttle. Many suspected that he had delayed the take-off by his late arrival. This was indeed true, but Spock had no idea of it. The Starfleet grapevine had worked again, spreading the word to the passenger shuttle's pilot that they were to carry a celebrity on their next journey. They had kept a discreet watch for him, and strained the blood pressure of the shuttle's flight controller to detonation point by prevaricating all over the departure procedure to allow Spock a few minutes' leeway to get on board. Now, the pilots - in a wonderful about face - were urging the almost demented controller for an immediate clearance. Sublimely unaware of the flight controller's fate, Spock finished his journey through the cabin. A pair of seats backing onto the end wall of the compartment and the steward's kitchen and services area were the destination. The aisle seat was empty.

"This is it, sir. Your bag will fit in the compartment under the seat, but there will be no room for this one too. If you'll permit it, I'll store it in the services area and return it to you at the other end."

Spock nodded, his chest burning with the effort not to relieve his oxygen debt. "Thank you. The offer is appreciated."

He bent down and neatly deposited the heavier bag into the vacant compartment, snapping the restraint latch closed. The steward waited until he was seated then checked that the lap strap was secured. He hurried to get to his own seat, and strapped himself in.

The lap strap was a convention held over from the days of the purely combustion engine/jet air carriers. It created the illusion of greater safety-consciousness on behalf of the passengers. It also helped to prevent the passengers moving around during lift-off and disturbing the delicate balance of the lifting body during the few crucial moments of departure when the slightest fault by man or machine could cause a disaster. This fact was *not* emphasised in the publicity brochures.

Spock relaxed into the seat, leaning back against the headrest, and allowed his thoughts to roam whilst his body recovered from the sprint across the crowded terminal and the control he had imposed on it since boarding the craft. Vulcans, dignified and aloof, did not pant in public. They only ever permitted themselves to breathe deeply.

His thoughts did not roam far. All his spare mental time over the previous few, hectic days, had revolved around one problem. He had entered pon farr again.

It was a problem that he had been half expecting to occur and he had made plans to cope with it should the time come again. McCoy had been very discreet and responsive to Spock's tentative approaches to him on the subject. Without actually mentioning the problem at all they had established the need for a weekly medical check on Spock. McCoy always ran the checks himself, concealing from the medical staff and all other interested persons the agreement between them by mounting scathing verbal attacks on Spock, which - naturally - Spock parried with pithy comments of his own. The nurses had begun to look forward to Spock's seemingly reluctant visits, and the loud battles that took place during them. Indeed, sickbay often had visitors who did not require medical attention when the time for the weekly checkup arrived.

The seven months since V'ger had been a time of growing joy for Spock. Never before had he appreciated the Enterprise and all the beings aboard so fully. His revelations during the linking with V'ger had showed him the need he had for emotion and the terrifying effect that emotion had on him. He knew that he had to come to some understanding of these alien sensations before they destroyed him.

With McCoy's gentle help, given in discussions held privately either in his quarters or McCoy's, he had first begun to accept and then to experiment with the feelings he had suppressed for so long. These sessions, so contrasting in tone to the almost savage weekly encounters in sickbay, the two had managed to keep secret from everyone aboard; including Jim Kirk. Spock was learning the full meaning of IDIC and McCoy was finding more happiness in spending time in Spock's company than he had ever thought it possible to know from so normal an occupation. Both men had more reasons than enough to guard jealously what they were creating between them.

Three weeks earlier, the foundation of all Spock's fragile contentment had been attacked by McCoy's findings during the weekly medical check. The signs had been slight; the merest trace of imbalance; but McCoy, fully alerted by Spock's cautious approaches, had been watchful enough to notice them.

McCoy had double checked his equipment and run the tests again. The same results were produced. He had said nothing to Spock; the fluctuations might have been caused by any number of factors. The following week's check had shown a slight increase in the imbalance. McCoy had held his peace until their next private meeting, and then, in the safety of his quarters, he had broken the news to Spock.

Half expected though it was, the information almost stunned the Vulcan. When he had recovered they had quietly gone to the almost deserted sickbay and checked and rechecked every piece of equipment for any slight fault. Then they had run the medical again. The results were still positive. Spock had entered *pon farr*.

They had returned to McCoy's quarters. McCoy had offered Spock a glass of brandy. It had been accepted and drunk in silence. Spock finally recovered enough of his composure to allow him to speak with a semblance of normality.

"Do you have any estimation available of the time left to me?"

McCoy shrugged. "I wouldn't exactly call it an estimation - more a partly educated guess. At most, three months. I'd say, to be on the safe side, two. What do we do now, my friend?"

Spock shook his head, then with an almost inaudible sigh, replied. "I will have to inform the Family Council. I have no... partner arranged yet. I thought I had a little more time left to me. The Family will see if any is available."

"You mean that there might not be?"

The outrage in McCoy's voice caused the not-quite smile to peep out on Spock's face. "I could hardly be described as an ideal mate for any proper Vulcan woman. I defied my father and the Family to join Starfleet; I have lived amongst aliens for most of my adult life. I was part of an unexplained 'incident' which resulted in my childhood bondmate turning to another. I entered Gol as an acolyte. I was accepted by the Masters as an equal and was offered Kolinahr, only to refuse it at the final ceremony and leave Vulcan to return to Starfleet and the aliens I had worked with before in another unexplained incident. I have become almost a legend. And - I am a half-breed." Spock's voice held a very dry humour. "The only asset I have is my position as heir in an important family on Vulcan."

McCoy snorted disdainfully. "Well, if they're dumb enough to turn you down just because your past is a little... chequered... " He stopped as the inevitable outcome of such a rejection repeated themselves in his consciousness. He poured himself another brandy with a hand that wasn't as steady as it could have been.

"I have to ask this. What if they all turn you down?"

"Then I will go mad, and die. If all do refuse me I will not return to Vulcan merely to die there. I believe that the pressure chamber in the astro-physics laboratory will be strong enough to contain me. Of course, I will

need your co-operation... and Jim's."

The Doctor took another mouthful of brandy. "Do you want me to tell Jim?"

"No. No, I will tell him. But - thank you for offering."

McCoy felt like crying. The Spock of old would never have said that. Thanking people for something they did or offered to do wasn't 'logical'. They had come so far...

"Will you refrain from mentioning this to Jim until I have finalised arrangements with my Family? He will only worry, and I would not wish to disturb his enjoyment of Christmas. He is anticipating that his stay at the Academy with Jerry Weston and his family will be an enjoyable occasion. He has spoken of little else since the orders came directing the Enterprise to Avalon." He paused. "I regret if I have caused your reunion with Joanna to be affected."

The lump in McCoy's throat got larger and his eyes smarted. "For a guy who's supposed to be a genius, you - " He stopped and shook his head; now was not the time for verbal sparring. "I'll keep quiet, of course. And don't worry about me and Jo. We'll manage. And I'm confident that T'Pau'll come through again. Do you really think that she'll let you down?"

Spock winced at that memory. T'Pau had 'come through', but the price was high. She had invoked Tradition on him. In all Tradition there were precedents. The heir of the House was bound, solemnly and unavoidably, to continue the line. The woman that the Family had found for him was willing to be his mate and bear his children but her conditions for the match were strict. She had lost her childhood bondmate in the destruction of the Intrepid. She had come to detest Starfleet and all it stood for. Her conditions were simply stated and exacting. Spock was to leave Starfleet, at once and for ever, returning immediately to Vulcan and never leaving there while their marriage lasted; after which he could go where he wished, providing it was not back to Starfleet.

Spock had been neatly trapped. By Custom. By Tradition. By biology. By his totally implacable grandmother and her supporters. T'Pau's authoritative manner showed through all the discussions that he had had with his Family, and with the woman T'Prilia and her Family. He could not deny them, and they knew it.

He had been free of his inherited duties for twenty-four years. Now they were being replaced on his soul, binding him back into the Vulcan mould from which he had fled into space. Stoney-faced, he had agreed to all the conditions requested of him, stipulating only one of his own in return. His would be the sole authority in the matter of the raising of his children. His and his alone. No other would be permitted any say in the matter.

T'Pau, thinking to bind him to Vulcan for a longer period of time, had agreed formally on behalf of his Family to his demands. So had T'Prilia and her Family. Spock had allowed himself to feel a grim satisfaction in his hidden victory. Vulcan would learn of the true nature of his final rebellion at a time of his own choosing.

While the negotiations were taking place, the Enterprise headed for the planet Avalon.

Each year the custom of Starfleet had become that, if circumstances permitted, one Starship at least would be in orbit around a safe planet for the period of the year known as Christmas. This time, in recognition of services lately rendered to Earth, it was to be the Enterprise. The

planetfall would, naturally enough, serve more than just allow the crew R & R for the course of the Festivities on a planet. Avalon housed a branch of Starfleet academy, orbiting dry-dock facilities and a selection of personnel in all stages of training, as well as a thriving civilian population. While the crew celebrated the Festival, the Enterprise would be overhauled and the refit, interrupted by V'ger, would at long last be completed to Starfleet specifications.

Elaborate plans were being made on Avalon to entertain the crew. Foremost in the promotion of these schemes was Port Admiral Jerry Weston, Head of the Avalon Annex of Starfleet Academy and long-time friend and rival of one James T. Kirk. Weston had been invalidated out of active service but had found the job of trying to run the Academy nearly as satisfying, personally, as being the captain of a Starship.

Nothing could ever be quite as good as that, of course, but he had adjusted, throwing himself into the role with the same unbounding energy that he had used to such tremendous effect on the bridge of his Starship. His marriage, and the production over a number of years of three sons, had filled his life so that only the odd yearning still intruded.

Weston, his wife Dolores - herself ranking as a Captain in the Science Section of Starfleet - received the news of the impending Christmas layover with great delight, and actively promoted any and all plans laid before them by their staffs. This Christmas was going to be memorable.

They had suffered some disappointments. Kirk announced that Spock would not be joining the other house guests at the Port Admiral's residence. Spock, when the invitation had been relayed to him by Kirk, had declined; when pressured for a reason by his irritated Captain, he had told Kirk that his precipitate departure from Gol to Earth had left a large number of Family matters outstanding. The settlement of these matters was becoming crucial, hence the sudden increase of messages between the Enterprise and Vulcan. He expressed regret at having to miss the celebrations.

He acted his part well, not *quite* lying to his Captain - a feat which he had not believed he could accomplish successfully. He misdirected Kirk by telling him part of the truth. He stated that for the period of the Christmas Festivities he would be occupied at the Vulcan housing enclave known colloquially as 'The Refuge', resolving these matters. Kirk had reluctantly given in, but had in the process managed to extract a half promise that the Vulcan would attend the Academy Christmas Ball, if it was at all possible.

McCoy had been harder to deal with. Spock told *him* that T'Prilia and her Family would be arriving on the day designated as Boxing Day to complete the formal betrothal in preparation for the marriage ceremony. Again, misdirection using part of the truth succeeded. T'Prilia and her Family were due on Avalon on Boxing Day, and the betrothal was to take place then. Spock neglected to tell McCoy that the betrothal ceremony would be followed immediately by the formal marriage ceremony, Spock's resignation from Starfleet and his return to ShiKahr.

McCoy had no reason to suspect that Spock was deceiving him, and had accepted the story without demur, while publicly sparring with Spock over his 'retreat from Human company' over the Christmas period. Spock accepted the verbal 'assaults' in the spirit with which they had been offered. Inside, he was storing memories of his friends against the long years of loneliness to come.

Selfishly, Spock had decided not to announce his departure until after he had left. He had no wish to endure the consequences that would

inevitably arise from such a disclosure. He treasured each moment with his friends - with all the crew - and grieved inside where no-one could see his sorrow, reflecting wryly that he had learned to be Human enough to tell a lie.

Spock did interfere with some of the plans made on the Enterprise. The Senior Bridge team had decided to throw a party on Avalon for the rest of the crew. They had scheduled it to be held on the arrival of the Enterprise, before the crew scattered, and had contacted a catering firm on Avalon for all the preparations to be made for them. The Vulcan contacted the firm, and upgraded the party. The firm was very cautious at first about the changes requested. The quoting of Spock's personal funding account and the revelation of his identity caused amazement amongst the firm's employees, but then they readily agreed to keep the changes to the party structure secret from the rest of the Enterprise personnel and to charge the whole cost to Spock's account - once they had checked with the local Starfleet security section that it was acceptable, and they only cleared it after checking with the Port Admiral who finally gave his clearance after he had recovered from his laughter. Having checked Spock out, the catering firm followed Spock's amended instructions with a whole-hearted enthusiasm that, even at long range and filtered by the communications procedure, he found vastly but secretly amusing. They reasoned that any group of people who could cause a Vulcan to arrange a Christmas party had to be very special indeed, and so added a few additional extras of their own which they somehow never did get round to charging Spock for.

Spock spent a great many of his shifts finishing up projects being run by his Science Department, or detailing in reports the steps which would bring others to successful conclusions.

Scott received from the Vulcan some plans showing a modification to a power routing which would greatly simplify the maintenance of the system involved. The contrast between Scott's almost incoherent praises and Spock's grave replies caused the bridge team to crack up. The Engineer left the bridge still ringing with laughter to include the plans into the workload of the Avalon engineers.

Spock slept little, begrudging the time that he could otherwise spend more profitably. His medical checks showed the predicted increases in the imbalance. Excitement mounted through the ship, the Human crew infected with an almost hysterical good humour, the non-Human personnel gleefully joining in; and finally, the ship entered orbit around Avalon. The exodus to the party and subsequent shore leave began even before the great starship was secured in the orbiting dock. Shore leave was such a precious commodity that every second was individually treasured. Spock, too, was treasuring seconds.

The final hand over to the dockyard engineers freed the senior crew to join the rush planet-side. Kirk, McCoy and Scott, in civilian dress, shooed the rest of the senior team down to the party and went stalking their elusive Vulcan. They discovered him on the otherwise deserted bridge, using the communications console, looking unfamiliar in an impeccably tailored suit; and vaguely irritated.

"Calling someone?" teased Kirk.

"There is no purpose in using a communications console unless it is for the purpose of communication," was the stiff reply.

"Anyone we know?" badgered McCoy.

"I have been attempting to contact Dr. Florence Rood - at the Academy,



at her residence, through several messaging services. I am beginning to form the opinion that my efforts are being intercepted."

"Dr. Rood," mused Kirk. "You've mentioned that name before."

"Aye, we have," Scott replied. "She did the groundwork and theory development that Spock used to create the intermix equations for the safe 'cold start' when we were going out to V'ger. She's got an honorary chair in a dozen universities. Teaches Engineering Theory at the Academy on Avalon."

"Could it be that she's avoiding you, Spock?" said McCoy slyly.

"That is another possibility."

"Never mind, Spock. I'll get Jerry to corner her for you. Let's go to the party. I'm beginning to get thirsty," said Kirk.

The four were in the lift when Spock dropped his verbal bombshell. "I regret that I will be unable to attend the party with you."

"You must!"

"Aye!"

"Dammit, why not?"

"The difficulties of travelling during the Christmas period on any Human planet preclude it. The Refuge is not readily accessible from any Starfleet installation. I must use civilian passenger transport to reach there. The only one with an available seat leaves in twenty one point seven minutes. If I am not aboard that departure, I believe that my arrival at the Refuge will be seriously delayed."

"Blast!" said Scott.

"Quite," Spock agreed.

Two small bags awaited Spock in the transporter room. An Avalon technician stood at the controls.

"I've contacted the passenger terminal, Commander Spock. They are ready to receive you now."

Spock nodded and turned to face his friends. "I trust that you will have an enjoyable Christmas celebration, gentlemen."

"It would have been guaranteed if you were going to be sharing it with us, laddie."

"Unfortunately impossible. I must go now. Enjoy the party."

Kirk grinned to hide his sudden disquiet. "We will. We'll tell you all about it the next time we see you."

Spock's non-smile appeared. "I will look forward to that meeting." He raised his hand in salute. "Live long, and prosper." He faded into the brilliance of the beam.

Kirk frowned at the empty platform. McCoy nudged him. "What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know. I've just got this feeling that something is wrong."

McCoy, who had also been affected by the same irrational mood, was saved from finding a convincing answer by Scott. Theatrically throwing his arms aloft, he said, "Laddie, will ye never relax? What can be wrong? It's Christmas - and while it's no' so good as Hogmanay, it's far better than fending off a bunch of idiot Klingons."

"Yeah, and we're wasting it. Come on - let's go to the party."

Kirk shrugged, smiled a little sheepishly, and joined the others on the platform. "Party, please, Chief," and the Chief sent them on their way with a sigh of relief, glad to be rid so easily of the most exacting Starship Engineer in the Fleet.

Spock almost sighed as the loneliness crashed back onto him. He had left his communicator in his cabin on the Enterprise to prevent his being contacted through it, and the Refuge had instructions not to pass messages on to him from anyone except Vulcans. Until T'Prilia arrived in two point seven days' time, he would be totally alone.

While he was considering how to spend his time, he became aware that he was being subjected to intense scrutiny by the person occupying the other seat of the pair. Spock returned the scrutiny and saw a tiny, very elderly Human female regarding him with an all too knowing gaze.

"You only just made it, young man. You shouldn't have stopped for that last drink. It doesn't do you any good, rushing alcohol. Takes all the fun out of it."

Spock became aware once more of the clinging smell of alcohol and the damp, tacky touch of wet cloth about his arm.

"The drink was not mine. Three inebriates in the terminus attempted to share their celebration with me. They were quite adamant in their generosity."

He nodded, indicating his arm, and as he hoped, she followed the movement, noticing for the first time the darker patch staining the silver-fawn cloth.

"Oops, sorry. My mistake. I assumed... That is, I thought you'd been indulging. It's Christmas, and I... At my age you'd have thought that I could have learned either to keep my mouth shut or to apologise coherently, wouldn't you?"

Spock, lonely, aching and afraid, found her openness irresistible. Instead of ending the conversation with a glacial comment, he promoted it.

"No apologies are necessary, Madam. It was *"no, not that phrase!"* very easy to assume that solution. However, alcohol has no attraction for me. Why blur reality when clarity of thought is so much more interesting?"

"With an answer like that, you just have to be a scientist."

Spock affirmed.

"Snap! Please allow me to introduce myself. I'm Florence Rood."

"Greetings. Would you be Dr. Rood?" Spock found that his lately recovered breathing rhythms were becoming unstable again.

"Yes, that's right." The reply was cautious, but Spock did not

notice.

"You produced a paper on the theory of instantaneous intermix for Matter-antimatter generators?" Spock pursued the matter of identity, oblivious of the wariness growing in Dr. Rood's eyes.

"Right again. Have you read it?"

"I have. I have been attempting to contact you, through the Academy, for the past eight days to arrange a meeting with you. I did not receive a reply, and - "

"And so you decided to arrange a meeting yourself?"

Spock blinked, startled at the transformation in the woman beside him. She had gone from friendliness to scathing anger in a fraction of a second. He stiffened, inexplicably hurt by the change and the accusation. He felt nauseous and light-headed.

"No, Madam. I did not arrange this meeting. And as you now obviously have no wish to talk to me, I will refrain from bothering you for the remainder of the journey. I regret that I cannot remove to another seat. There are none vacant."

He relaxed back into the seat again, stomach churning, head pounding, thankfully shadowing his face in the all-concealing hood of his jacket and wondering bitterly just what he had done wrong in that conversation.

Meanwhile, the shuttle's pilots had contacted the stewards and informed them of the identity of the late arrival. It was a very nervous young man who approached the still figure in the aisle seat.

"Excuse me, sir?" he said timidly.

Spock wearily focused his attention on the man and wondered at the change in his attitude and at the light-weight thermal blanket he was carrying.

"Sir, your jacket is soaked, and doubtless your shirt is too. If you could give them to me, there's a cleaner unit on board and I can have them cleaned and returned to you before we land."

Spock debated with himself briefly, weighing the wisdom of disrobing in public against weathering the unvoiced disapproval which would be generated at the Refuge by his stained and odorous garments. He mentally shrugged. *Why not?*

"Your offer is appreciated."

He flicked the catches of the outer jacket open, slipped the hood back and wriggled out of the garment. The shirt followed. The steward deftly took them and draped the folded blanket around his shoulders like a cape.

"I know the temperature on Vulcan is a lot higher than our normal cabin temperature. It would have been too cold for you to sit there in just your vest. Good thing it's got short sleeves. I'd have hated trying to get you to give that to me, too." His eyes twinkled.

Despite himself, Spock twinkled back. "I would have been most reluctant to part with it. Some standards must be maintained."

The steward chuckled. "I'll bring some wipes and a towel for you. If you'll excuse me."

He vanished into the services area and reappeared almost immediately with damp tissues and a more substantial drying cloth. Spock thankfully used both to rid himself of the sticky alcohol adhering to his arm and hand.

"I'll be able to start serving dinner shortly. This is the selection we have available today. If you would consider your choice, sir, I'll return for it once I've put your clothes in the cleaner unit." He vanished again.

Spock snuggled back into the seat, wrapping the blanket a little more firmly around himself. He became aware that Dr. Rood was staring at him again. He met her eyes with a fine show of Vulcan defiance.

"May I apologise to you again. I know there hasn't yet been a Vulcan born who'd think of arranging an 'accidental' meeting when to all intents and purposes a meeting has been refused. I'm sorry that I reacted as I did. In the past, the 'accidental' meeting has been used by some rather unscrupulous beings to get close to me and my work. I assumed, quite incorrectly, that you fell into that category. I was, and am very obviously, totally wrong."

Spock nodded once and turned from the woman, unwilling to venture any further conversation with her. He studied the menu. Dr. Rood, fortunately, didn't give up easily.

"I feel I must explain about the lack of response to your enquiries at the Academy." She waited until Spock looked at her again. "It's my staff. They worry about me. Think that I should slow down. That I'm working too hard. That I'll overtire myself. They are a bunch of blithering, short-sighted cretins!" Her voice rose, then fell again. "Sorry, I forgot myself. I know I mustn't yell when I'm with Vulcans. But my staff do make me so cross! Damn it all, I spent my whole life either cramming knowledge into my brain or into the thick skulls of my adorable children, all of whom are dimwits of the first order. Now, when I'm finally getting some return for all the years of hard work, when I'm finally producing some original ideas, they want me to slow down. I know I'm getting old. I can hardly forget that I'm ninety six. I have so little time left to me, and they want me to waste some of it! That's the reason you didn't get a reply. They simply didn't pass your messages on to me. But - " she breathed deeply and pinned a bright smile on her face - "we have met now, and I know it was accidental and that random factors have favoured us both. Won't you please forgive a stubborn, tactless old fool and tell me what it is you wanted to talk to me about?"

She held her breath, studying the Vulcan as he considered her words. She rather liked what she saw. Face a little too thin and lined, hair black and shiny as a raven's wing but touched by silver in front of those elegant, untouchable ears. The eyes were special; deep brown, verging on black, and clear and honest. She, like so many, regarded the eyes as the windows of the soul. She judged the worth of men and aliens by the look in their eyes. She breathed again, uttering a small prayer of thanks as the Vulcan inclined his head a fraction. She realised she wanted to get to know the man behind the eyes better.

"I wished to discuss the translation of your theories into a practical solution for a 'cold start' on a Starship."

Dr. Rood held up a tiny hand. "You've come to the wrong person. There's a Vulcan Science Officer in Starfleet who has already done it. I've only got some of the details, I'm afraid, but you're welcome to what I have got. I've been trying to contact him for months to get the maths for it, but I haven't had any success. Maybe you'll do better. His ship is on

active service and I suppose my messages just haven't caught up with him yet - too low a priority."

She stopped as she became aware of a wonderful sight. The Vulcan next to her was blushing, a delicate fairy shade of green, and was looking distinctly embarrassed.

"That is why I wished to speak to you."

Dr. Rood suddenly remembered the Starship that was causing all the fuss at the Academy. She had avoided getting involved with the partying, but the name she had heard so often over the previous few days registered unexpectedly.

"The Enterprise! She's in orbit. You're Spock?"

The green deepened. "I am. Your messages 'caught up' with me along with the orders to divert to Avalon. I was attempting to meet you to explain in person why I did not gain your permission before I used your work and also why I have not contacted you before this."

His voice trailed away as he waited for her to reject him again. Dr. Rood smiled gently at him, and reaching over, daringly patted his clenched hands.

"My dear boy, I'm aware of the fact that Earth was in some great danger. Oh, not the details - only what is common knowledge. One hell of an alert; and the Enterprise being 'cold-started' out of dry dock to intercept something that was inbound and, I presume, considered to be of hostile intent. I am only too pleased that my work was of any help to you. Just tell me - what did you do, and how did you do it?"

"Before you tell her, Commander, would you give me your dinner order, please?"

Spock clung desperately to his fast-vanishing self-control and swivelled around to face the steward, acutely aware that the full attention of the passengers in the surrounding seats was now focused firmly on him. Before he could speak Dr. Rood verbally rescued him. "I didn't give him a chance to make a choice, Steve. I've been talking too much. Sorry."

"That's okay, Doctor. I saw you were talking and didn't want to interrupt anything important, but if I don't start serving you soon you won't have time to enjoy the meal, so if you wouldn't mind, please?"

Spock scanned the menu, looking for vegetarian dishes.

"If I might suggest?" Spock swivelled back to face the Doctor. "Are you hungry? The vegetarian menu is excellent and the frothy coffee is quite superb."

'Frothy coffee' was the Human nickname for a favoured Vulcan beverage with a name which was totally unpronounceable by anyone except a Vulcan. The brew was not a stimulant, but the taste, not quite coffee nor chocolate but somehow a blend of both with some other flavours added, had made it one of the widely accepted common drinks of the Federation. Unfortunately, the drink was made from the seeds of a plant that rarely grew to maturity other than on Vulcan. This made the amount of original brew available rather limited, and synthetic brews were the normal offering on most worlds. Humans were rarely able to distinguish between original and synthetic; Vulcans had no such difficulties and avoided the synthetic whenever possible.

Some of the indecision Spock felt must have shown on his face. Dr. Rood commented casually, "It's not synthetic, nor is the food. All real stuff, no imitations. Good. That's settled then - we'll have the honey melon, Vulcan vegetable risotto followed by the fruit salad, and we'll have Frothies. Could you bring the Frothies first, and perhaps another blanket?" She smiled sweetly at Steve and continued. "The blanket was a very good idea, but I'll bet you're none too warm now, Spock. If I remember Vulcan correctly, this temperature is just about normal for the Vulcan Polar regions."

Spock stiffened again. "I have become accustomed to living in a relatively cool atmosphere."

"But there is no logic in suffering unduly when there is a readily available alternative at hand, is there?" She smiled impishly at him, then relented as she recognised a hint of almost-confusion in the motionless features. "Now we're sorted out we can have our little chat. You said you were trying to see me. Have you got the maths with you? How is it stored?"

Spock realised that he was being managed, but perversely, felt quite comfortable with the idea. "I have it stored in a tricorder."

"Only a tricorder?" Florence felt disappointed, somehow expecting something more.

"It's not quite a standard model. I have made a few modifications to the basic design." He bent down to reach under the seat to retrieve his luggage, lifting the casing and positioning the display, which was of necessity small, so that she could see it clearly.

"I started from your basic formula, and then... "

The watching (and listening) audience around the very unusual duo heard them slip from Standard into a purely symbolic mathematical language as they began to explore the theory of possibilities surrounding the destruction by association of matter and anti-matter. Steve interrupted gently but with great determination.

"Doctor. Commander. I know you'd much rather talk than eat, being naturally careless of such obvious necessities, but I'm only a mere normal mortal trying to do my job. So if you don't mind putting your computer away, I'll serve the dinner."

Spock obeyed, then Dr. Rood and Steve combined to tuck more blankets round him. "There, that'll keep you warmer. Ah, the Frothies."

Spock accepted the tall beaker and eyed the brown, cream and green swirls without enthusiasm. He had tasted too many 'non-synthetic' Frothies to believe he had been given the genuine article this time. He sipped cautiously, then, as the taste trickled into his brain, took a more appreciative swig at the liquid. He swallowed half of the contents of the container before he paused, and was totally unable to conceal the tiny smile which crept onto his lips as the drink revived memories of his childhood on Vulcan. Florence had been watching his reaction.

"Commander Spock - I am going to ask you a very rude personal question. How long has it been since you last drank a *real* Frothy?"

Spock considered the question, and decided to answer it truthfully. "Nine point two three standard years, approximately."

"Gods!" gasped Steve. "I'll get you another, sir," and departed

before Spock could speak. Spock attempted to regain some control over the proceedings.

"Madam - " he said formally.

"Please, Commander, call me Florence - and don't apologise again. It's a Human habit which you have obviously cultivated along with the Human art of conversation and various other touches like nodding to indicate acceptance. You have mastered them all exceedingly well. We now have more important things with which to concern ourselves." She gestured behind him. "Food."

Steve presented them with enormous wedges of chilled melon and two more beakers of frothy coffee. "Eat in good health," said the steward, and completed his normal vanishing trick.

"He always does that. Reminds me of the Cheshire Cat. His smile lingers on long after the rest of him is elsewhere."

Spock nodded almost absently, his nausea forgotten as he savoured a mouthful of melon. Florence began pumping Spock about himself, his background and why he was on a civilian shuttle.

"I am going to Vulcan shortly. The details of my visit have to be settled. I am going to the Refuge to finalise the arrangements. And... it is a safe place to hide from Christmas."

Florence giggled, rather awed by the Vulcan's confiding manner. *I've known him something less than an hour, and he's talking to me - me - as if he's known me all his life. As if I were a trusted friend! I wanted to know him better, but this? Maybe I'll waken up soon.* "I'd have thought you could have hidden on the Enterprise quite safely. Or is that a leading question I shouldn't ask? This melon is delicious, isn't it?"

"The Enterprise refit is being completed here. The abrupt departure from Earth left several items unfinished and the ship has been handed over to the orbiting dock's crew to be brought up to full specification. I would not have been permitted to remain on board during this time. And yes, this melon is very palatable. The meals on the Enterprise are adequate but there is really no comparison yet for a natural product. The improving of the standard of starship catering is one of Leonard's ongoing projects."

"Leonard?"

Spock flinched mentally at the slip, but forced himself to reply calmly. "Dr. Leonard McCoy, the Chief Medical Officer. He has very definite views on this subject. We have been attempting to improve the quality of the synthesized products by adding a random element to the food processors' control programs."

Florence looked puzzled. "I'm sorry - I don't understand."

Spock swallowed the last of his melon before replying. "The obvious drawback of synthesized food products, apart from the basic difficulties of re-creating colour, texture, flavour and smell, is that once the formula has been set, it will be used to create a faultlessly exact duplicate of the original sample each time the program is run."

"And that's a drawback?" Florence sounded incredulous.

"Yes. Getting precisely the same strength of coffee in each cup every time you request one is one of the reasons why synthesizers are not widely

used on most planets. And the cause of our investigations into solutions to the problem. It becomes... boring to eat food that has no variety in taste and texture. Boredom is something which could lead to a serious problem on a starship."

Spock suddenly felt very hollow inside, realising anew what he was leaving behind. He gulped some Frothy to ease the tension in his throat, and continued as normally as he could. "Expected excellence in food becomes accepted, then resented. It can lead to dietary problems, behavioural anomalies. There are no extensive facilities available for the production of natural foods on starships. A limited quantity can be provided, but not nearly enough to satisfy the demand. So we have been attempting to improve what is currently available on the ship."

"It's also the reason why we serve real food on these flights." Steve joined the conversation in what he devoutly hoped was a natural manner. "Apart from the obvious publicity benefits in attracting customers, it helps to create a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere on board. You may not have noticed it, but the emotional state of this shuttle has gone from highly charged to mellowly relaxed in something less than an hour. Food is all part of the therapy."

"You speak as if you regard the people on this flight as patients. Are you a medically qualified professional?" asked Spock.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am. I'm a trained nurse, studying to get my specialist papers in Behavioural Sciences. All the cabin staff are medically qualified - the Chief Steward is a full M.D. and we've got nurses - oh, all sorts. Naturally, we're all trying for better things... like Starfleet. Don't let the food get cold or it'll spoil."

Fascinated by the surprising words spoken by the steward, neither had noticed him collecting the used dishes and replacing them with bowls of steaming vegetables and rice; and a further supply of Frothies.

"I've been travelling on this line's shuttles for the past fourteen years, backwards and forwards from the Academy to my home, and I never realised that," Florence commented. "Shall we suspend the chat and concentrate on the food?"

Spock agreed and they completed the main course in silence.

Florence heaved a contented sigh as she laid down her fork. "The Vulcan meals are always good. The Vulcans at the Academy use this line to commute to the Refuge. The Frothy is for their benefit, to attract them to this company's service. Not that they'll admit to anything so crass influencing their choice of transport! It's good for general business, carrying Vulcans. Funny - there's usually some on this flight, but I haven't seen any tonight, other than yourself."

"Perhaps they left early to avoid Christmas?" suggested Spock.

Steve conjured with the dishes again and left the third course and a fourth helping of Frothies.

"Apart from arranging your trip to Vulcan, how are you going to spend Christmas? Are you meeting up with your friends from the Enterprise? You don't have to answer me if you don't want to. I'm being nosey."

"I did receive several invitations to accompany various people on shore leave. I believe the term to describe me would in most cases have been 'a gooseberry'. Jim Kirk is staying with Port Admiral Weston and his family. I know them slightly from previous visits, and was invited too. I

refused. My presence would have had a limiting effect on their natural ebullience."

"And Dr. McCoy?"

"He is going to spend Christmas with his daughter. It will be the first time they have spent any period greater than a few hours in each other's company for many years, since Joanna was a very small child. I would definitely be in the way there."

"I know the problem. People invite you because they like you and don't want you to be left alone, but they don't really want you along because three is the wrong number for what they have planned."

Spock chewed a cherry to destruction. "That is essentially the situation. If I remain with them, most of the crew, who are young and still unused to me, will be inhibited by my witnessing their more Human antics."

"So you leave them to spend a lonely Christmas at the Refuge. A very proper, officer-like decision."

She wondered at the fleeting expression which vanished almost as it appeared.

"I have always tried to be a 'good' officer. I know that I have often failed because of my inability to communicate in terms that others could understand."

"Well, you've sustained an interesting conversation, in trying circumstances, with a complete stranger for one and a half hours. I'd call that pretty good communicating."

"You are not a complete stranger to me. We have met before."

"We have? Oh dear. I'm sorry, but I don't remember - and I feel sure that I should do." Her voice trailed away, inviting further information.

"We met on Vulcan during your first visit there, while you were studying at the Central Academy."

"Good gracious. That was nearly forty years ago!"

Spock refrained from giving the exact figure. That little game was reserved for people he would never see again. He missed them already; the hollow feeling had returned.

"I was a young child. You aided me with a mathematical problem I was having difficulty in resolving."

Florence dug wildly back through her memories of that time. *Vulcan. Always too hot... too dry. Never enough air to breathe. The pain of the then recent unmarriage from the father of her children. The realisation that they were grown enough that they no longer needed her constantly around them. The thrill of being invited to study at the fabled Vulcan Academy of Science. Studying day and night... The cautious invitations from the others who worked there to their homes...*

"Got it! A tutor in Computer Sciences. Sark... no, Sarek. He invited me to dinner, to meet his wife. I'd arrived a little too early, and I'd gone for a stroll around the garden to stay out of the way until the other guests arrived. There was a little boy, plugging away at a portable computer. He... you were using a sehlat as a backrest."

"Correct. Your instruction enabled me to see how to solve the problem, and then you stayed talking to me until it was time for the meal to be served."

Florence studied the too-thin man beside her. His whole appearance spoke of hard, unrelenting effort. An image of the young Spock swam across her mind's eye. The softness of the very young had vanished without trace, but the open honesty and overwhelming curiosity were still there... to be seen by anyone with enough wit to look for them.

"I didn't get formally introduced to you then but I'm very glad we've finally got together again. Will your business at the Refuge take very long to complete?"

Spock paused before he answered, patiently considering the switching of subject and what appeared to be a considerable direct breach of the rules of privacy.

"My business will not begin until Boxing Day."

"Do you have anything special planned for the next couple of days, then?"

"No."

"I was wondering - would you care to spend some of the time discussing the intermixes - or anything else you fancy - with me? We haven't had much chance here and now."

She watched Spock anxiously, wondering if she had gone too far and offended against Vulcan propriety as she had sometimes unwittingly done in the past. She discovered a phenomenon which was endearingly familiar to the senior crew of the Enterprise; Spock managed to convey the distinct impression that he was smiling without allowing any muscle in his face to move from the normal Vulcan control.

"I would be honoured to spend any time you have to spare in your company, but if you will allow me to ask, will not your Family expect you to spend the Festival with them?"

"They did. They wanted me to go with them to one of the holiday islands. They've hired the whole place. My six children, their current partners, their children and their children's current partners, *their* children and all the assorted in-laws and out-laws and friends. A grand total of seventy seven persona, but one is extremely pregnant and may decide to make it seventy eight before very long. I love them all dearly, but there won't be one soul there within twenty five years of me, and if the truth be told, apart from blood ties, we have very little in common. Frankly, I'd be bored silly in a couple of hours. Their original thinking revolves around the accumulation of wealth. Nothing wrong with that, of course. But I'd much rather talk to you and try to feed you up a bit. You're far too thin."

"Leonard keeps telling me that. He worries about me."

"People tend to be concerned for their friends." She fumbled with her belt pouch and produced a square of plastic. "Here's my location coding. You do have access to a trundler? Don't you?" as Spock looked blankly at her. "Trundlers are one of my better inventions. Goes back to when I was in my twenties. I was contracted to establish an integrated transport system here on Avalon. I had a series of controller computers set up and recorded in them a location code for every residence, the code also doubling as a communication coding for the video network. The trundlers

are luxury boxes on wheels. You climb in, close the door, tap out the code for the destination you want - or use one of these little tabs - and the controller computers do all the driving for you."

"A very simple solution. My congratulations."

"There have been a few modifications over the years. Manual overrides are a practical necessity for some people, and new controllers have had to be added as the living areas expanded. Outside the centres of population the whole thing is manual. Of course, the first trundlers were very crude compared with today's models. But I'm still pleased with the system. There have been only three fatal accidents in sixty-odd years of operation, and they were all caused by the people involved tampering with the control system. How were you supposed to get to the Refuge? Was someone going to meet you?"

"No. I was given a tab and told that public transport would be available at the terminal."

"You'll never get a public trundler at this hour. The demand will be far too great. I'll give you a ride to the Refuge, it's on the way to my house. I have my own private trundler - one of the perks of having set up the whole thing in the first place. Don't you dare try arguing with me! Put this tab away - you may want to contact me some time."

She glared sternly at Spock as he meekly obeyed her, tucking the little tab in with several others. Florence suppressed the sudden surge of curiosity about the coding on them.

"That's settled. I'll drop you off at the Refuge tonight, and pick you up from there at hour nine, local time, tomorrow morning. That'll give us a good long time to spend talking and a fair chance for me to stuff some more food into you."

Spock decided not to try arguing. He reasoned, quite rightly, that Florence would 'fight dirty' and smash his logically reasoned arguments into so much hot air. He also accepted the validity of her conclusions. He had eaten more in the past hour than he had in the previous week. He was feeling relaxed and confident. He realised that he could face his 'business' at the Refuge with a greater degree of control than he could have achieved without the stimulation and company of the elderly, nagging little woman seated beside him. The Human elements of his makeup briefly considered what life would have been like for him if his grandmother T'Pol had acted towards him in the way Dr. Rood had done. He gave up the notion almost immediately. He had begun to learn how to consider most possibilities, but that particular idea was still beyond him.

Steve collected the empty dishes then reappeared with Spock's clothes. He handed Spock his shirt. Sliding the blankets from his shoulders, he quickly wriggled into it, the cabin air striking cold on his body for the few seconds he spent protected only by his vest. Steve solemnly handed over the jacket and removed the blankets.

"Thank you for your attention during this flight. You have helped to make this journey an enjoyable one. I hope that you are successful in your studies and fulfil your ambitions. My compliments to all aboard."

Steve glowed at the Vulcan, surprised and pleased by the unexpected words of praise. "Thank you, sir. I'll pass your message along to the rest of the crew. Have a good holiday." Clutching the blanket, he vanished again, leaving Spock's bag next to his seat.

Florence tapped Spock's arm. "You are a very nice being, Spock. I'm

delighted to spend time with you." Spock managed to look discreetly embarrassed, much to Florence's joy.

The shuttle made its expected safe landing exactly according to schedule; they disembarked and the crowds in the terminal parted before the obviously distinguished Vulcan and his tiny companion to let them proceed without the usual jostling. They reached the trundler park without stopping, in what Florence mentally labelled as record time, and claimed Florence's personal trundler. Spock, who had been prompted by innate rather than instilled courtesy to carry both sets of luggage, packed them into the vacant space behind the double seat while Florence climbed in and began programming the destination.

He took his place beside her then gasped, his hands tightening convulsively on the armrests as the seat moved, clinging to him.

Florence mistook his reaction. "Don't worry, you aren't imagining it. The seat is an extra safety device. Despite speed locks and auto-evade mechanisms, there can still be minor collisions, particularly outside the main living areas where manual control is more common. If the sensors round the trundler detect an unavoidable object, first the seat cuddles you then an enormous great air bag inflates out of the panelling to stop you from being thrown around. Spock? Spock! What's wrong? Oh - no!"

The Vulcan was rigid, sweat showing clearly on the suddenly bone-white face. The concern in her voice slowly penetrated Spock's tumultuous thoughts. The seat's unexpected caress had triggered a reaction which Spock remembered all too clearly. It was sheer lust - the same vivid, violent desire which he had experienced for the first time on Vulcan at the mating ceremony when he had entered the Plak Tow. His thoughts tumbled, jarred from their normal orderly patterns.

I still have two months to go. We checked the figures, the Doctor and I. We couldn't have been that wrong! Not sixty days adrift. What's gone wrong? The hybrid strikes again? Am I truly so different? I must control. I must. T'Prilia is not here yet. I cannot, must not, allow myself to run amok here. Control. I will control. Humans are so fragile... Jim - I almost killed thee! Must that happen again? No - I cannot allow it. Not again. Not ever again. I will control. I will it. Control!

Florence watched tensely as Spock's intellect battled with his instincts for control over his body.

She had spent many years on Vulcan, studying and working. At first, as in all new places, the local customs had been strange to her, but gradually patterns of behaviour had emerged from the confusing mosaic, doubly alien because they were not Human and not relatable to Human behaviour patterns.

One pattern she had come to notice more than any other. Occasionally - very occasionally - a Vulcan would begin to act strangely, exhibit edginess, uncharacteristic aggression, loss of concentration. Little things that in a Human society would have passed unnoticed but which in a Vulcan society were glaringly obvious.

Strangely, the other Vulcans appeared not to notice these lapses and ignored both the irregularities and her discreet questions about them. The Vulcan concerned would always disappear for a few weeks 'on business', and then reappear at his assigned tasks as if nothing had ever happened.

It had taken until her third trip to Vulcan to correlate the 'business trips' with the appearance four seasons later of a child. Finally guessing

part of what was going on, her curiosity had led her to dig out most of the answers.

So she waited, praying for the Vulcan next to her to re-achieve some measure of control, feeling instinctively that the planned 'trip' couldn't happen too soon.

Finally Spock relaxed into the seat, and Florence, with a little unstoppable sigh of relief, pushed the start button on the control console. The trundler left the terminal smoothly and began the computer-controlled journey to the Refuge.

Spock broke the ensuing silence. "I will not be able to join you as we arranged. I apologise for the sudden change of plans, but..." His voice broke and he shuddered, wondering what excuse he could give.

"But you've just realised that the 'business' you were going to Vulcan to deal with has become urgent and you'll have to go sooner than you expected, and so you've got to do a lot of re-arranging to get your trip brought forward."

Spock gazed at her, puzzled and wary. She met his gaze levelly and without a trace of her normal smile.

"In total I've lived on Vulcan for fifteen and a half years. I suspect that's nearly as long as you have. You get to notice... *things*... eventually."

He swallowed. He had been in Human company long enough to realise that there could only be one interpretation of his companion's words. No explanations would be needed.

"The tricorder contains all the data on the intermix. There are copies in its memory of all my notes and details of further research that I have instigated since my return to the Enterprise. I would be honoured if you would accept the device and its contents as a Christmas gift."

Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears. "I'll be very honoured to accept it. Perhaps you'll be able to come back and discuss it all with me, after...?"

Spock closed his eyes. *After?* "I doubt that I will be travelling from Vulcan for some years. I will, of course, be able to communicate with you by message-tape. Your links with the Science Academy and your reputation will make you an acceptable communicant."

Florence accepted the sudden bitterness in his voice as yet another symptom of his condition, and did not speak to him again until the trundler stopped at the Refuge. She spent the time worrying about his comment about 'not leaving Vulcan for years'.

Spock regarded the long expanse of lawn and the thick barrier of carefully manicured hedging with disfavour. In his unstable condition, the precise greenery, viewed in the fading twilight, was menacing. He felt a great reluctance to leave the safety and warmth of the trundler.

"Is there anything I can do to help you? Anyone I can contact for you?"

Spock replied dully. "No. Leonard is my physician, and knows about... 'things', but there are Healers in the Refuge and it would be very unfair of me to interrupt his Christmas with a situation that he can do nothing to alleviate. Jim? Jim also knows, but not about... now. If I

told them, they would come to me, but they would have to explain to their present companions. What excuse could Jim give to a Port Admiral for walking out of his house party? They have been friends for years, and I would not wish to do anything which might harm that friendship. How would Leonard explain to his daughter? Their relationship is still somewhat tenuous. I cannot ask companionship of either of them now."

"I suppose you're right, but I feel as if I'm abandoning you. I know it's silly, and I've known you for less than three hours, but already you do mean a great deal to me."

"You forget that we first met over forty years ago." He paused, then continued hesitantly. "I have come to know that a friendship can be made in a few moments. I believe that this is so with us."

Touched, she knew that she had to make the goodbye easier for him. "Thank you, Spock. I believe that too. Take care, and don't forget to write to me. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Florence. Live long, and prosper." He saluted her, and left the trundler. The air struck chill through the thick jacket as he retrieved the lighter of his bags. He turned and trudged towards the trees screening the refuge.

Florence, crying softly, sat watching him go. She was still watching as he staggered and seemed to rebound from a wall she couldn't see to crumple bonelessly onto the grass. She left the trundler and hurried towards him, cursing her years as they slowed her legs. As she reached Spock she could hear him moaning, a thin, eerie sound which raised the hair on her neck.

"Spock? Can you hear me? Can you tell me what's wrong?"

Kneeling beside him, she strained and managed to flip him over onto his back. His tear-streaked face held such a look of abject terror that she thought he had gone quietly mad.

"Spock! Please - try to tell me what is wrong."

She touched his face cautiously. He seemed too hot to her touch, but totally unaware of her presence. Deciding to risk it, she grasped his shoulders firmly and shook him as best she could, calling sharply.

"Answer me this instant! Tell me what's wrong!"

This had an effect she hadn't bargained on. With a sudden movement, Spock twisted in her grasp, and burying his face in her lap, started to cry. Instinctively, she cradled his head and shoulders, stroking his hair and murmuring comforting, meaningless words.

"Ssshh, my dear. There, there. It's all right. I'm here. Ssshh, now. I won't let anyone hurt you. Ssshh, now..." *I don't know whether to pray for someone to come along or for everybody to stay away. How am I going to explain how and why I'm cradling a demented Vulcan on the front lawn of the Refuge, at my age?*

She continued to murmur soothing noises, petting him and stroking the soft black hair, and gradually the convulsive sobbing became less forceful.

"Florence?" said a muffled voice.

"Yes, it's me. There's been no-one else here. Nobody but you and me." *What a stupid thing to say! What happened?*



"Have I hurt you?" the voice asked timidly.

"What? No, love. You haven't hurt me. It scared me when you collapsed, but you haven't hurt me."

"Will you help me?"

"Of course I will. What do you want me to do?"

"Get me away from here. Now. *Please.*"

"Don't you have to go inside?"

"NO!" Spock pulled himself out of her grasp. Staring at her, he pleaded. "No. That's what she wants me to do. They all do. They're waiting for me. But I can't. I just can't. Please - help me to get away!"

"I'll help you. Whatever you want. We'll go to my house. Is that all right? Good. Now, get up, and help me up."

Spock rose smoothly to his feet and lifted Florence. Her legs felt stiff and weak and not totally under her control; which just about fitted the description of her world view at that moment. When she finally got all the way upright, Spock was staring at the Refuge, all intelligence gone from his face. She shook his arm gently. His gaze slowly shifted to her face, searching her features as if he had never seen her before.

"The trundler is over there."

She clung to his arm as they walked slowly back to the vehicle; partly to keep him going in the right direction, but mostly to help her to stay upright and mobile.

What a time to start feeling my age! Oh to be twenty - even ten - years younger!

She had to unlatch the door and tell him to get in and sit down. Closing the door on him she paused. Spock's bag was lying where it had fallen, a shadowy lump in the twilight. She was debating the wisdom of fetching it when she shivered.

The distant sound of sleigh bells reached her, and they seemed to be coming closer. She decided not to risk Spock's being seen in his present condition. She slipped into her seat and punched her home co-ordinates. The trundler was moving before she dared to look at Spock.

He was relaxed, face expressionless and wet with forgotten tears.

The silence lasted until the trundler stopped inside the garage of Florence's house and the doors had shut behind them.

"We have to get out now. We've reached my house. We're here."

Again Florence had to guide Spock. She steered him into the living area and called to the house controls for dimmed lights, curtains and fire. The room responded as she dumped cushions onto the rug in front of the fireplace.

"Sit down there in front of the fire. I'll get some blankets."

She came back with an armful and a bottle of Saurian brandy. Spock was gazing into the fire; he was shivering, and huddled thankfully into

the heavy cloth when it was draped round him. Florence poured out a large measure of brandy into a glass produced from her pocket, but had to steady his hands before he could drink any of it.

"Purely medicinal, of course. I know doctors don't recommend it for shock victims, but I'm fresh out of Vulcan tranquillisers today."

A tiny glimmer of sanity appeared in the glazed eyes, prompted by the evenness of her voice and the unexpectedly familiar phrases.

"You know what is happening to me. This is a natural, necessary occurrence, but the time is wrong. It is all happening far too quickly, far too early. I will need medical assistance; but not from the Refuge. I now have no choice; will you call McCoy for me?"

"Of course I will!" Florence was relieved that she wouldn't have to cope with Spock on her own. "Do you have the coding?"

Spock fumbled at his belt pouch but was defeated by his trembling hands. He allowed Florence to fish out the tabs.

"This one labelled McCoy - right?"

Spock nodded.

"I'll go and call him now. You stay right there."

She requested the call and poured herself a large brandy. The liquid eased the tightness in her chest, and brought false colour to her cheeks. The screen flickered, then produced the call-held logo. A computer voice spoke.

"Dr. McCoy is not available at this time. Please leave a message if you wish. Speak now."

"Damn, damn and damn!" Florence pulled herself together. It hadn't occurred to her that McCoy wouldn't be at home. "This is Dr. Florence Rood. I'm a friend of Commander Spock. He was taken ill on the journey to the Refuge and is currently at my house. I'd be very obliged if you would call me as soon as you can, please. We will be waiting for your call." She transmitted her house code and finished the call.

In her absence Spock had curled up on the cushions and gone to sleep. She tucked some more blankets round him, reflecting wryly that it seemed to be becoming a habit. Then she raised the thermostat for the the over-all room temperature, and settled down into an armchair with the brandy to wait for McCoy to call.

Kirk, McCoy and Scott walked into what they expected to be a fairly small party and were immediately assaulted by music, lights and Uhura, who was waiting impatiently for Spock. After hearing her slightly incoherent account of Spock's 'meddling', the three gleefully recounted Spock's excuse for not attending the party, and watched as she exploded, threatening dire retribution on the Vulcan.

"Hmph! 'Seriously delayed', indeed. I'll give him 'seriously delayed' when I catch up with him! He might have warned us."

Kirk hugged his communications officer. "That's the whole point - he wanted to surprise us. He did it beautifully. And he *would* have been seriously delayed - we'd never have let him get away with this little

episode lightly, would we?"

Uhura attempted to keep her anger against Spock alive, but the smiles on her friends' faces were too infectious, and she gave in, giggling, then whooping with laughter. "He did us! He really did us. Oh, I'll get you, Spock - you just see if I don't!"

McCoy started to speak but was interrupted by a slender girl throwing herself into his arms and kissing him. Startled, he tried to free himself, then realised that the eyes laughing into his were exactly the same shade of blue as his own.

"Jo?!"

"Hello, Dad! Merry Christmas. Spock does throw a good party, doesn't he?"

"Spock. You just wait, you pointed-eared maniac!"

The small group was augmented by Jerry and Dolores Weston ambushing Kirk as he turned to greet Jo, and the kissing and hugging became widespread as the crew and other guests became aware of the arrival of the senior officers.

It was several hours later when McCoy and Jo slipped away from the party, which was noisily and happily continuing past the expected finishing time. McCoy, slightly the worse for wear, was soon asleep, curled up in the seat of Jo's trundler. Jo, without any hesitation, had hi-jacked her father away from a phenomenally inebriated Scott, and thus had abandoned Kirk and Jerry Weston to a similar fate unless Dolores found a way to intervene on their behalf. Jo had traded shamelessly on her position as her father's daughter, and also as the newest and youngest medical practitioner at the Academy, to acquire her Christmas leave, and she was determined to spend as much of it as she could with her father - preferably while he was reasonably sober.

Unknown to Jo, at exactly the same time she was separating her father from Scott, Dolores was busily putting her own arrangements into action.

Kirk and her husband were sneaking some sandwiches in a quiet side room when Dolores caught up with them. "Having a good time, boys?"

Weston smiled joyously at his wife. "Of course. I'm thinking of letting the Vulcans in your team organise the Christmas Ball."

"I'm sorry, Jerry. They're all fled away into the Refuge. We won't see any of them again until Christmas is safely over. We might try getting Spock involved, though. He does a pretty good party."

Kirk shook his head sadly. "He's at the Refuge too. I got a near-promise out of him to come to the Christmas Ball if he could." He stared pensively at the half-eaten sandwich in his hand.

"Missing him already, Jim?" asked Weston.

"It's not that. I've just got this feeling that he's in trouble."

"Jim, I give you my word - there is no way he could get into trouble on Avalon without my knowing all about it. He boarded a commercial flight - only just, I have to admit, the pilot had to hold the departure to let him get aboard - but he made it. He is in the company of one of the most respected scientists on this planet, and I personally will kick my Chief of Security into orbit if the screen around her leaks enough to let anything

happen to either of them."

"Her? Who's he with?"

"Dr. Florence Rood. She's on the staff here and Spock has been trying to contact her. Her staff are censoring her calls, but my Security staff are monitoring her staff. With a little bit of fiddling of random factors, we arranged for them to 'accidentally' sit together on the flight."

Kirk hooted. "He was getting as worked up as a Vulcan can about being unable to contact her. I joked that I'd get you to corner her for him."

"All part of the service. Seriously, Jim - our Florrie's a tough old bird; as independent as all get-out. Insists on living by herself out in the backwoods. We pamper her, and pander to her vanity. A tight security shield is kept over her at all times. Spock is with her, and is included under that shield. I doubt that the shield is as close as it normally is; Spock is, when all is said and done, a Vulcan, and he would notice it. But it *will* be efficient, I promise. So let's go back to the party and have a good time."

"Not on your life, my love," said Dolores.

"You don't want us to have a good time?" asked Kirk.

"Of course I do. I just don't want you to go back to the party."

"Why not?" asked Weston indignantly.

"Because there's no need to. It's swinging along quite nicely all by itself, thank you, and nobody will miss either of you."

"I have to stay. Someone has to put Scotty to bed," stated Kirk.

"All arranged. Four of the Engineering staff are Tarl from Epsilon Indi, and so are two doctors from the medical section. They are eager and willing to monitor the effects of alcohol on an exotic alien."

Kirk choked his laughter. "So they match him drink for drink and stay completely sober, and keep an eye on him while they're doing it."

"Clever Dol, my darling. What did you bribe the engineers with?"

"The chance of spending hours in the company of the fabled Montgomery Scott. They almost fell over one another in the rush to say 'yes'."

"Okay, that takes care of my Chief Engineer. What about my Chief Medical Officer?"

"Already gone. Jo lifted him out of Scotty's orbit like a true expert, used the transporter to get to the coast, dumped him into her trundler and is heading for her apartment even as we speak."

Weston and Kirk exchanged very speaking glances. "Do you think that we're being managed, Jim?"

"I think that it's entirely possible, Jerry."

"Quite right too, boys. Let's go home. I've got a proper meal waiting for us. It's got some of your favourite dishes in it. Crustacian Salad for openers. Roast Devilope with all the trimmings. Barbarian Cream Pie and a selection of the very best cheese to round off the evening; with all the appropriate wines, of course."

Kirk felt his mouth begin to water at the prospect of this feast. He formally took Dolores' hand and kissed it tenderly. "Captain Weston, if you ever feel like trying a change of husband... "

"You go find your own wife, Kirk. I've only just got this one trained!"

The three were still scrapping and 'snarling' at each other as they left the party, unnoticed - just as Dolores had predicted - by the frantic horde. Their passage was noted, though. The Security staff kept a tight shield over their Admiral and his lady, too.

Leonard McCoy came blearily awake.

"Dad!" said the voice again.

"Um. Jo? Where are we?"

"My apartment. Can you walk? I value my back too much to try to carry you."

"Sure I can walk!" McCoy looked round in amazement, "How did we get here? I don't remember leaving the party."

He winced his way out of the trundler as Jo laughed at him. "I'm not surprised. You were drinking with Mr. Scott and trying to do some sort of Cossack dance with a man you called Pavel, two Andorians, a Tellerite and four other Terran types. I thought I'd better get you away before you crippled yourself."

"That good, eh?"

"Better. Come on. I've got some wonderful hangover relievers in my medicine chest."

They walked arm in arm up the pathway and into Jo's spacious living quarters. Jo handed her father the correct dosage and left him to fend for himself in the bathroom while she checked her messaging service. When he came back, Jo was waiting for him with a cup of steaming hot coffee.

"Better drink some of this too, Dad."

"Something wrong, Jo?"

"It shows that much? I'll have to practise more. Patients don't like being able to read doctors that clearly. It unnerves them." She waved at her computer screen. "There's a message on my messaging service for you. From Dr. Rood - she's a member of the Academy on the engineering side." McCoy nodded, gulping the coffee. "She says that Spock was taken ill on the flight and is at her house. She wants you to call her."

McCoy put the cup down carefully. "Do you have her code?"

"It's all set up. Just touch the green pad. May I listen in, Dad?"

He considered ethics for a very brief moment then agreed. "If Spock is ill, I may need your knowledge of Vulcan medicine."

"I hope you don't."

"So do I. There's only one way to find out," and he touched the pad.

The screen cleared, and the two doctors eyed each other.

"Dr. Leonard McCoy?"

"Guilty, Ma'am. What can I do for you? Your message says that Spock was taken ill."

"Yes. It was shortly after we had left the flight. He collapsed."

"What?! Where is he now? Can I speak to him?"

"No to the second. I've got him wrapped in blankets in front of a roaring fire, and I've upped the thermostat to Vulcan levels. He was going into shock. I think he's asleep, and I'd prefer him to stay that way."

"You've done the right thing. Er... do you know why he collapsed?"

"Yes, I do. It's to do with a trip he was going to take. To Vulcan - on *business*."

She stressed the last word and locked eyes with the image on the screen, nodding slowly and firmly in answer to the obvious questions asked by the whitening face.

"I'll be with you just as soon as I can. Just leave him asleep if you can. Keep him as warm as you can manage, lights dimmed and no sudden or loud noises; and try to avoid touching him."

"I do understand, Dr. McCoy. I'll be careful. We'll see you soon, then. Goodbye."

She broke the contact and walked to sit in the armchair by Spock. He did not react to her. His face was turned towards the fireplace and his body hidden by the blankets. Only the harsh sound of his uneven breathing joined the crackling of the fire to shatter the quietness. She poured herself another brandy, and settled herself to await the arrival of his friend.

McCoy turned from the screen and smiled at his daughter. It wasn't a particularly good smile, and it slipped away leaving his face strained and white, and to Jo's disquiet, old.

"I'll have to go to him. Can I borrow your trundler?"

"I'm coming. You go get your kit and I'll go get mine."

"Jo, you mustn't come. I don't dare let you. It wouldn't be safe."

"Safe! *You're* going. You may need help. Oh yes, I know you're the great C.M.D., Star Surgeon and innovator of the Fabrini Techniques, and I'm a very junior, just-qualified M.D., but I'm a *Vulcan* M.D. And - I love him too. Before he went to Gol, he spent hours teaching me the Vulcan language and etiquette. He was never too busy to help me with my studies. Living in his Family's house helped me so much... I care about him, the same way I care about you and Jim. Please - let me help."

"I don't have time to argue with you."

"Then stop wasting time and move yourself!" She swept out of the room. She changed out of her extravagant party gear into a very practical jump-suit and was waiting with her kit when he rejoined her. His kit was

considerably larger than hers.

"All right, you can come. But understand this, young lady. I'm in charge, and what I say goes; no arguments. If I say move, you move - and if I say run, you run like all the devils from Hell were chasing you, and you don't stop and you don't look back. Is that clear?"

Her father had disappeared; a Starfleet Commander stood in his place.

"Who'll be chasing me?" teased Jo.

"Spock," came the terse reply.

"Oh... "

They climbed into the trundler and Jo pressed a pad, keying the start sequence with her fingerprint. "Attention Central Control. This is Dr. Joanna McCoy requesting a medical priority routing."

"Working. Please indicate destination," came the automated response. Jo held out her hand for the destination tab and slipped it into the slot.

"Co-ordinates accepted. Is further assistance required?"

"Not at this time."

The trundler swung out of the drive and accelerated into the night. A Human voice suddenly spoke out of the control panel.

"Jo, this is Rog. If you do need any help, don't get too stubborn and try to handle it yourself. We're here to help. You just yell good and loud and we'll come a-running. You hear me?"

"I won't get stubborn, Rog. Thanks for the offer, but this isn't really my case. It's my Dad's. One of his people is down and I'm just providing quick transport."

"Ah - sorry, sir. Didn't realise you were there, sir."

"That's okay. If we need backup we'll yell good and loud, believe me."

"Yes, sir. Your E.T.A. is now at seventeen minutes. I've cleared the priority all the way through. Good luck. Listening out."

"Nice young man, that."

"Just because he called you 'sir', and grovelled... "

His smile barely flickered and he cleared his throat, searching his mind for another safe topic of conversation. "I didn't realise the Academy had a vocal channel override into the controller. Useful."

"Each doctor on the staff has his or her own channel. Vocal checks to initiate the override with automatic feed through to the Duty Officer at the Medical Centre. What's wrong with Spock?"

"I don't know for certain."

"But you're a whizz at making guesses. Share it out, Dad, or do I walk into it cold? I studied at the Vulcan Medical Institute for two and a half years to get my doctorate. You and Spock got me in there. I know Vulcans. So don't try to keep me blind on this. It won't work."

"Did you study Vulcan biology?"

"I was afraid it was something like that when I heard about the... er... 'business trip'. You think that he... "

"That's what it sounds like. The woman who called - Spock and Scotty have been singing her praises for months. If I remember them correctly, she's worked at the Vulcan Science Academy; she may very well know what she is talking about."

"And if she does?"

"Then something has gone wrong. Very, very wrong. Spock discussed this particular problem with me after we'd cleared up the... um... the problem that got us back together on the Enterprise. He's been coming to sickbay each week so that I could run a full medical check on him. Oh, we put on our usual double talk for the benefit of the watching multitudes; but we knew there was no way to avoid what was going to happen, so we kept on plugging away." He paused, gazing out into the darkness, patently reliving past events.

"Three weeks ago I spotted the first signs. We double checked all the equipment, recalibrated the scanners and then ran blind and double blind analyses on all the samples I took from him. They all tallied positive. I've checked him every day for the past two weeks to plot the curve. Dammit - I checked him less than twenty hours ago. He still had a good two months left! We *couldn't* have been that wrong, Jo. We were so careful... "

"I can imagine. It was important to you, and you're very good at your job. With Spock checking you, I'd have laid odds that you'd get down to pinpointing the hour." She spoke the words dryly.

"With estimates as to the minutes and seconds, my dear," was the reply, with a glimmer of spirit.

"Which means that you didn't make a mistake, because if it was important to you, think how important it was to *Spock* to get it right."

"So something is wrong with him, but it needn't be that." He sighed. "You are a pretty fair head doctor, little lady."

"Runs in the family. How do we go on when we get to Dr. Rood's house?"

"I'll examine Spock. You check the old lady - she looks about ten years older than the Moon. I know you've wider practical experience of Vulcan medicine, but I've majored in Spock - and besides, if it is *that*, the last thing we need is for you to trigger him. I should have brought my phaser. If he gets going it will be the only thing that'll stop him. I'll have to get Jim to bring his with him."

Jo didn't need to apply much thought to realise that her father was already convinced of the cause of Spock's collapse and so steered the conversation into the more neutral area of her posting to the Medical Centre and how she was settling in.

"Of course, the Vulcan training helps. I'm the most junior of the staff doctors and one of the few with sustained off-world E.T. experience. I don't know how you wangled that with Spock. Don't give me that innocent look - I asked him how he knew about my wanting to attend Vulcan Medical School. He said you mentioned it. You fraud - I may be quite good now, but I certainly wasn't then! I had to work all hours to keep up. Oh, but it was fun, Dad, and I lost all my flab. No more diets for me."

"Maybe we should send Jim to live with Sarek and Amanda for a spell. He's 3.8 kilos over again now, and heaven known how much he'll be over by the end of this leave."

They were still plotting improbable diets for Kirk when the trundler turned into the driveway of a darkened house.

"Here we go."

When Dr. Rood answered the door she was slightly startled to find two doctors standing on the step.

"I don't know how you got here so quickly, but I'm glad you did. He seems to have a fever and it's mounting. Gone up two degrees since you called."

"You got him to co-operate on a temperature check?"

"No. I used his tricorder. He's in there by the fire. He hasn't moved or spoken."

"Thanks." McCoy moved cautiously to the huddled figure by the fireplace. Behind him, he was aware of a low-pitched conversation, then Dr. Rood was leading his daughter through another door which closed, cutting out the light, leaving only the light from the flames and the twinkling sparks on the Christmas tree.

"Hello."

"Hello yourself. Lie still while I check you out."

The blankets subsided. McCoy made musical notes with his medical scanner, reset it and tried again. Neither man spoke until McCoy had finished.

"I make it about eighteen hours."

"My estimate is nearer sixteen. I am not so sanguine about safety margins as you are."

The blankets moved and realigned themselves. Spock leaned back against a convenient chair, still gazing into the flames.

"We need to talk, my friend. We have to decide what to do," McCoy said gently.

Spock looked at the doctor for the first time. McCoy was startled and shocked by the change in the Vulcan's features. The lines were deeper, the leanness intensified to the point of emaciation. Exhaustion was plainly visible in every plane and angle of his face.

"I have few options open to me. Jim will have to be informed of my condition. I did not have the control necessary to make that call myself. I still do not have it."

"I'll go and call him now."

McCoy padded through the dimness to the computer terminal, and punched in the code for the official residence of the Port Admiral. He waited, twitching, trying to think of any reason, however implausible, that he could use to reach Kirk.

The screen brightened to reveal a painfully alert ensign. "Good



evening, sir. May I help you?"

"Yes. I'd like to speak to Captain Kirk."

"I'm sorry, sir. Captain Kirk is not available. May I take a message? I will relay it to him as soon as he becomes contactable."

"Good try, son. Where is he? Having dinner?"

The ensign quivered, wondering if this stranger knew that the Admiral was giving a dinner party and had threatened him with dire retribution if he were disturbed for any reason other than a full invasion alert.

McCoy grinned despite the worries which had lately fallen on his head. "You just trot along to the party and tell Captain Kirk that there's a man waiting to speak to him about a very urgent matter."

"Sir - Captain Kirk is not available."

"Eyewash. Just go and get him - *now*."

"Sir, I will give him a message - "

"Listen, Ensign, if you're too scared to interrupt the Admiral at dinner, that's your problem. I've got enough worries of my own right now. If you're not able to do your job, then get me someone who *will* get me Captain Kirk."

The ensign sagged unbecomingly, resigned to the inevitable. "May I say who wishes to speak to him?"

"I'm Star Surgeon Leonard McCoy, C.M.D. Enterprise."

The ensign departed, and a **Please wait** logo appeared. McCoy watched Spock watching the fire for nearly five minutes before the logo resolved into Jim Kirk's face.

"Okay, Bones. You got me in the middle of the first course, and it's a very good first course. This had better be good."

"It's not, Jim. It's about as bad as it can get. Is this link secure?"

"No-one's listening at this end. What's wrong?"

"That 'business' Spock was dealing with at the Refuge." The image of Kirk nodded, frowning. "It concerns the unresolved problem which led us to meet his grandmother. You remember meeting her?"

Kirk stiffened and leaned closer to the screen. "The same problem?"

"Yeah."

"How long to solve it?" Kirk was mentally calculating the passage time necessary to reach Vulcan.

"If we can't crack it within sixteen to eighteen hours we can forget the whole idea."

"Bones... Tell me you're drunk... or that this is some kind of joke."

"I wish I could, Jim - but I'm stone cold sober, and I'd never joke about *that*. I don't know how it happened, yet. We - Spock and I - knew

this was coming; we were going to tell you after Christmas. Spock was setting up the deal at the Refuge, and we were going to get it all sorted out first; but something has gone wrong. The date we had was for two months' time. Can you join us? Jo and I might need a hand." McCoy made an ancient hand gesture of cocked thumb, pointed first finger and fist.

Kirk nodded, his face pale. "You're still at Dr. Rood's house?"

"Yes. How did you know that?"

"There'll be time for that later. I'll be there as soon as I can possibly make it. Be careful."

"We will. See you soon." And they broke the connection.

Kirk stared at the screen after it had blanked. His thoughts were tangled, and he couldn't unscramble them enough even to stand up. He jumped when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder.

Weston shook his head unhappily as he looked at Kirk's shocked face. "It's bad news - it's written all over you so don't try to deny it. What did McCoy say?"

"I can't tell you. It's... personal."

Weston uttered a short epithet. "I'm responsible here. If there's trouble I need to know about it."

"It is trouble, but... Look, Spock's ill and you know how Vulcans get when they're not well. Bones wants me to go and give him a hand."

"We can get Spock moved into the Medical Centre at the base - "

"No! Please - let us handle this our way. Bones and Jo are already there with Dr. Rood. Between us we can look after him."

"Are you sure?"

"He's been.... ill like this before. We managed all right then, and making him go to the Medical Centre will only make things worse. If it was necessary, don't you think they would have had him hauled in there immediately?"

"I suppose so. You'd like transport, I presume."

"Whatever you can set up. The faster the better."

"How about a door to door transporter beam?"

"How long before I can use it?"

"It'll take about fifteen minutes to set it up. One condition, Jim."

Kirk stopped, diverted from his headlong rush to his room by the command tone in his friend's voice. "If there is anything you can't handle, the security people will close in on you if you signal to them. Otherwise they'll stand clear. Deal?"

"Deal. Thanks, Jerry. Sorry about the dinner. You can have my share."

He turned and ran. In the room assigned to him by the Westons he found that his bags had been unpacked. He rooted in the wardrobe, selected a sober lounging suit and changed swiftly, abandoning his party gear in a heap on the floor. The wall safe yielded his communicator, I.D. and - most importantly - his phaser. He ran to the transporter room and waited in fulminating impatience for the co-ordinates to be established. The personnel on duty wisely refrained from addressing the clearly agitated Captain and concentrated on speeding his departure.

McCoy sat down in a chair beside Spock. "He's on his way." Spock said nothing so he carried on. "Can you tell me what happened, or would you prefer to wait until Jim gets here?"

"I would prefer to wait."

McCoy stifled his dismay. "There is very little, medically speaking, that I can do for you. I have got some shots here which will reduce the most uncomfortable of the fever symptoms for a while. It isn't a cure and it won't delay what's going to happen, but it will help you to stay in control for a while longer."

The hypo hissed against Spock's arm several times, and McCoy eased him back down onto the cushions. "Stay there and be still. The quieter you stay, the longer we'll have to deal with this. I'll be back in a little while. I've got to go and check on Jo and Dr. Rood."

After the door closed on the darkened room, Jo and Florence faced each other in the brightly lit, spacious kitchen. Each examined the other openly, not trying to disguise curiosity with polite courtesy.

"I'm Jo McCoy. M.D. Lieutenant, Starfleet. His daughter." She jerked a thumb at the closed door.

"Where did you study?"

"Edinburgh and ShiKahr." The reply was proud.

"It shows. Vulcan training always does. I'm Florence Rood, and I'm old and tired and more than a little scared. Fancy a belt?" and she proffered the brandy.

"I'm young and terrified and yes, please." Jo relaxed slightly.

They gulped down the liquid and waited for the glow to start.

"Would you mind if I checked you out?" asked Jo.

"No, of course not, Jo. May I call you Jo? Go right ahead."

Jo waved the scanner and looked at the resulting readings. "You're in good shape."

"Yeah, of course I am. Considering I'm four years short of my century, have been scared out of half my wits by Spock collapsing, and the little fact that I've been hitting the bottle for the last hour or so. Have you got any soberiser in that kit of yours?"

"I was going to suggest it." Efficiently she sprayed the mixture into the old lady. "I've also given you a package of vitamins, minerals and the

like. Standard anti-shock treatment."

"I needed that too, didn't I. Do you know what's going on?"

"Best guesses only. I was rather hoping you could tell us. I don't know how much you know about - er, things, and how much I should tell you about what's happening."

"Let's sit down. I'll tell you what I know, and then you can decide how much you need to tell me."

Florence wasted few words in detailing her years on Vulcan and her gradual linking of certain erratic behaviour with the subsequent appearance of babies.

"So I did a little discreet digging about in the files. It was a clear case of hiding the truth in plain sight. Serves me right for being so nosey, I guess. Go looking for the truth on Vulcan, and that is what you tend to end up with. I found out about the pon farr. That every seven years or so a Vulcan male will enter a state of rut. They have to mate or go mad. It's the only form of marriage that they have. The only form of divorce is mating with another partner; and the family relationships get tangled all over with demi-cousins and step and half siblings. It's no wonder they are so formal and picky about family protocol. They have to be, to keep track of who is what to whom and in what degree."

Jo took some more brandy. "Nearly right. But not quite. I have to admit that Vulcan reproductive biology shook me rigid when I was first told about it. It seems so basically *wrong* for that to happen to such private people. I damned nearly quit after that class. I didn't, though. I went back to Spock's Family house, locked myself in the rooms they let me have and got roaring drunk. The hangover disguised the worst of the shakes the next day, and a bad case of the stubborn got me pass grades in the exam. Fortunately, that exam was only one of many. Dad and Spock pulled a lot of strings to get me my place at the school, and I felt bad about letting them down. I'd told Dad that going to a Vulcan medical school was what I most wanted to do. But you need good grades and a whole raft of recommendations from tutors to stand a chance. I had the grades but not the recommendations. Dad must have asked Spock for help; he gave it. Got me my place and arranged for me to stay in the Family house too. Some of his Family are not precisely in agreement with his close fraternization with us loony Humans, but his parents are really sweet people. Anyway, I graduated seventh out of the course intake of forty-six. Oh, they grade students - it's logical to let everyone know how good one student is in relation to another. The other non-Vulcan students were in the thirties, and I'm rambling on because I've got to tell you the rest of the truth and I don't want to."

Florence shivered. "The truth remains the truth whether it is known to many or only to one."

Jo fixed her gaze on her hands, and went on.

"The mating drive affects men and women in slightly different ways. Vulcan men in pon farr go mad because of the pressures placed on their body function by the reproductive organs readying the genetic material for mating. Once the material is ready, the Vulcan male has a very limited time span in which to find a mate. The peak of this urge is the plak tow - literally, the 'blood fever'. The higher functions of the brain are suspended. The urge to mate takes precedence over every other consideration. The men lose the ability to think about anything else. If they can't reach a suitable mate, or if they try to respond to the urge with an unsuitable partner, there is only one outcome. They go mad - and

then they die. The body functions are so overloaded that they collapse under the strain, because the higher brain functions which would normally regulate them have been 'switched off' by the reproductive urge. There are certain changes to the body structure as well. This also hastens the overloading. It's a particularly vicious circle. Mate - or die insane. Don't mate - and the race dies.

"Women aren't affected quite so badly. They have the urge to mate, but miss out on the madness and death part. They become very ill, and suffer terribly while the urge to reproduce lasts, but they can survive."

"And Spock needs to mate."

"That does seem to be the problem. He didn't deny it when you hinted it to him - did he?"

"No, he didn't; but there again he wasn't going to Vulcan immediately."

"Dad said that he had a good two months left. At least - that figure was correct when he examined Spock yesterday."

"Spock said that this was wrong. Too early. How much time does he have?"

"About sixteen hours, Dr. Rood."

"Oh no, Dad! Don't say that!" exclaimed Jo. "He must have longer!"

McCoy senior shut the door behind him and sat down at the table. "Dr. Rood, I appreciate that this is all very upsetting and disturbing for you. I'm afraid that we must impose upon your good will for a few more hours."

"Dr. McCoy, I first met Spock over forty years ago. I pride myself that he thinks of me as a friend. He is welcome in my house to do whatever he pleases to do here, as are both of you."

"We are honoured, Ma'am. There will be another person involved."

"Oh?"

"Jim Kirk. I took the liberty of using your terminal to contact him. When he gets here we'll try to get out of Spock what exactly has gone wrong; and what, if anything, we can do to help him. In the meantime I must warn you both not to go anywhere near Spock. Don't speak to him, and on no account are either of you to touch him." He lifted Jo's glass, sniffed the contents, then emptied it.

Much more of this behaviour and I'm going to have to start treating myself for alcohol addiction. I always seem to hit the bottle when Spock or Jim gets hurt.

Seeing the look of puzzlement on Florence's face, Jo continued gently. "Prognosis positive. He is trying to control himself. From the little you've said, he must have lost control completely, at least for a short while, twice. Now he's got a marginal measure of it back, but it will be precarious, to say the least."

"And he will be very aware that you are both female."

Florence spluttered indignantly. "You mean he'll... Dr. McCoy, I'm ninety-six years old. Can you really expect me to believe that a Vulcan will try to... to rape me?"

McCoy leaned forward, pleading with the woman for understanding and acceptance. "Dr. Rood. Florence. If he loses control, he will cease to be a Vulcan. He will cease to be a rational being. The mating urge will cause him to behave in a manner that, when and if he is ever sane again, will cause him very deep - and lasting - regret."

"I'm sorry. I just can't accept that."

He shook his head sadly, remembering. "I didn't either, the first time this happened. I went blithely on my way." He changed his mind and tried to convince her another way. "You've seen the publicity that Starfleet pumps out about the Enterprise and what we get up to. 'The greatest crew on the greatest ship', and all that blather."

Florence nodded, intrigued.

"Jim and Spock are the perfect command team, their rapport is a byword, a legend of how a team should work."

"You forget to include yourself. 'The Enterprise Triangle'."

McCoy blushed. "All right. Given that most of what is said is based in truth, would you believe that Spock would deliberately try to hurt Jim?"

"Not under any circumstances." The reply was quite definitely confident.

"Too bad. The first time this happened to him, when he went mad Spock tried to kill Jim. Came real close to doing it, too. If I hadn't cheated he would have succeeded; for a while he thought he had. It took a long while for him to forgive himself for it, or even just to trust himself around us poor, frail Humans again. I couldn't get any sort of argument out of him for over nine weeks, and it was another thirteen after that before he took up giving instruction to the unarmed combat classes again. He was literally terrified that he'd lapse back into the aggressive state again and wouldn't be able to stop himself hurting someone. He damned near resigned his commission; the verbal pyrotechnics when he suggested it 'for the good of the ship' were clearly heard in the corridor - despite the sound-proofing."

The door entry chimed, interrupting him. Gesturing them to stay in the kitchen, he went to the entrance. Kirk stepped out of the darkness, anxiously demanding to see Spock. He was bundled firmly, and a trifle desperately, into the kitchen, catching only a glimpse of the still form before the fire.

"Jim, I slipped him a sedative in with some other goop which'll relieve some of the fever symptoms for a few hours. He's out cold and he will stay that way for maybe an hour - if we're lucky. But I don't *feel* lucky tonight, so let's say forty minutes at most. We'll need that time to find out what each of us knows about what's happening and to decide what to do."

"Bones, I want to see... "

Florence had been sitting quietly and inconspicuously studying the third member of the 'Enterprise Triangle' arguing with his friend and C.M.D. in her kitchen. *He's younger than I thought, and he'd look younger still if he didn't look so worried. Strange, I thought his hair was golden; it's a sort of mid-brown, not really fair at all, and his eyes are more blue-green than honey-hazel. And he's smaller than I expected; he's standing toe to toe with McCoy there and he's got to look up. I think that I'd better break this argument up before something is said that we'd all*

regret.

"I never thought I'd see the day when a genuine Starfleet Captain threw a genuine temper tantrum in my kitchen."

Kirk's glare slowly swivelled from McCoy, who was standing blocking the door, to Florence.

"We haven't been introduced. I'm Dr. Florence Rood. This is my house. I live here. And I do not appreciate your behaving like a spoiled brat and wasting precious time. I gather we have much to do if we're to stand any chance of helping Spock." She glared back at him, matching his anger, arms folded and one foot tapping imperiously.

Kirk's sense of the ridiculous finally broke the deadlock, and a small, sheepish grin and an embarrassed flush appeared on his face. "I'm sorry. Please accept my apologies."

"None are needed, Captain Kirk. You're worried sick about Spock, as are we all. We've just had a little longer to get used to the situation. So I might suggest we have some food and discuss what we can do to help him."

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry."

"You'll get little chance to eat when the pace starts hotting up. Starving yourself isn't going to help Spock any, is it?"

"She's right, Jim. In fact, not eating is going to make things worse for him. His resistance to our emotions will be way down and the last thing he'll need on top of everything else is to feel our hunger."

"That settles it," said Jo, standing up. "What can you offer us to eat, Florence?"

In the living room, Spock slept on, unaware that his friends had gathered to help him. In the fireplace, the flames danced and shook as the artificial fire licked the logs which burned and burned and were never consumed. And they were mirrored in his dream.

Kirk ate quickly, sparing no thought for the excellent meal that Florence had produced from storage. He was far too interested in listening to the three doctors telling him, and each other, their information. He swigged down some Frothy and summed up the whole thing neatly.

"Okay, as I see it. Item: Spock was in the slow build-up stage of pon farr. This was first discovered three weeks ago, and he and Bones had plotted the explosion point for about two months' time. Item: Bones checked him within the last twenty four hours and he was still on that schedule. Item: in the transport he talked to Dr. Rood, who thought at the time that he was a very good conversationalist and he hinted that he'd been practising the art of conversation with McCoy, so she thought no more of it. I'm going to have to talk to you about this unwarranted secrecy some time, Bones."

McCoy shrugged. "You've always said that I would break through the armour. All I had to do was use the chinks that V'ger created and creep inside when he wasn't paying attention."

"Who - or what - is 'V'ger'?" asked Jo.

"I'll explain some other time," said her father.

"Item:" said Kirk firmly. "When he got into the trundler he lost control and took about ten minutes or so to get himself back together. You think that it was the cuddle seat that triggered him?"

"Yes. Now I think that it's fairly clear that the ease with which I struck up that conversation with him was partly due to the acceleration of the problem. I guess we were very lucky that nobody else was around when the seat got him."

"Yes, I think we were," said Jo. "I've been trying to remember something from one of the lectures. It's important, I know it is, but all this has just driven it out of my mind. Sorry. Please, carry on, Jim. I'll keep thinking about it."

McCoy frowned at his daughter, but Kirk waved at him. "Don't try to force it. It'll come. Item: he realised what was wrong, and got himself together. He was still hanging together when he got out of the trundler, but by the time he'd walked halfway to the Refuge, he'd cried out, tried to back away and collapsed. This time he was out for about thirty five minutes."

"Right. Again there was nobody else about, fortunately. He... he just... "

McCoy took Florence's hand. "Within the Family, all is silence."

"Are you Family?"

"I'm his doctor, and I've also treated his father. And Jim is t'hy'la to Spock."

Kirk looked puzzled. "You are too."

"What do you mean, Jim? You are - he said so."

"You mean he never told you?"

"Told me what?"

"That you are his t'hy'la too."

"How can I be? He picked you!"

"He picked *both* of us. 'T'hy'la' is the term used to describe the groom's chosen friends, the ones who stand with him at his wedding."

McCoy looked stunned. "He never said. I thought that he... that you... "

"That's how he did it!" exclaimed Jo.

"Did what?" asked Kirk.

"Got me into the Medical School at ShiKahr. He could ask for the same privileges for his t'hy'lae and their families as he could for his own. His children would be eligible for entry there, provided the entry qualifications were met. And of course they read the tutors' comments. I doubt if they understood them. 'Good worker, but could do better' would mean something totally different to a Vulcan, wouldn't it?"

McCoy had left the table and was leaning against the window, cooling his face against the glass. He could see only blackness and a warped reflection of himself. "Why didn't he tell me?"

"You'll have to ask him that, but if you'd like my best guess... "

"I'll settle for that right now."

"He was too scared to."

"Try to explain that to me, Captain, sir."

"His relationship with you meant a very great deal to him. He couldn't allow himself to tell you, but it did - I know because he told me so once. He was half out of his mind at the time - it was that trip when he got bitten by that snaky-spider thing the Klingons trapped us with."

"I remember. The wound was badly infected by the time we got you back, besides being poisonous to begin with. He was delirious for three days. The antidote you got from the Klingons pulled him round just in time - and one of these days you'll have to tell me just how you did get it from them."

"He said that if he didn't make it, I wasn't to let you blame yourself. He'd made some tapes for us, in case... well, you know, just in case. He didn't tell you because he couldn't bring himself to risk what he had. He just didn't know how you'd react. Afterwards, he asked me not to say anything to you about it - for the same reason."

McCoy sat down again, too choked to speak.

Florence was crying. "We all do it. Never say what we feel. Never tell; and live with the regrets for ever, haunted by what-ifs and might-have-beens."

Tears flowed freely. Kirk pulled the strands of his self-control together and blew his nose defiantly. "This is not helping Spock."

Jo sniffed mightily, then looked up. "Florence - when Spock collapsed at the Refuge. Did you hear anything?"

"Hear?"

"Mm. Any sounds."

"Well, there were a few birds when we stopped. Then he was... crying, and I wasn't paying much attention to anything except him. Is it important?"

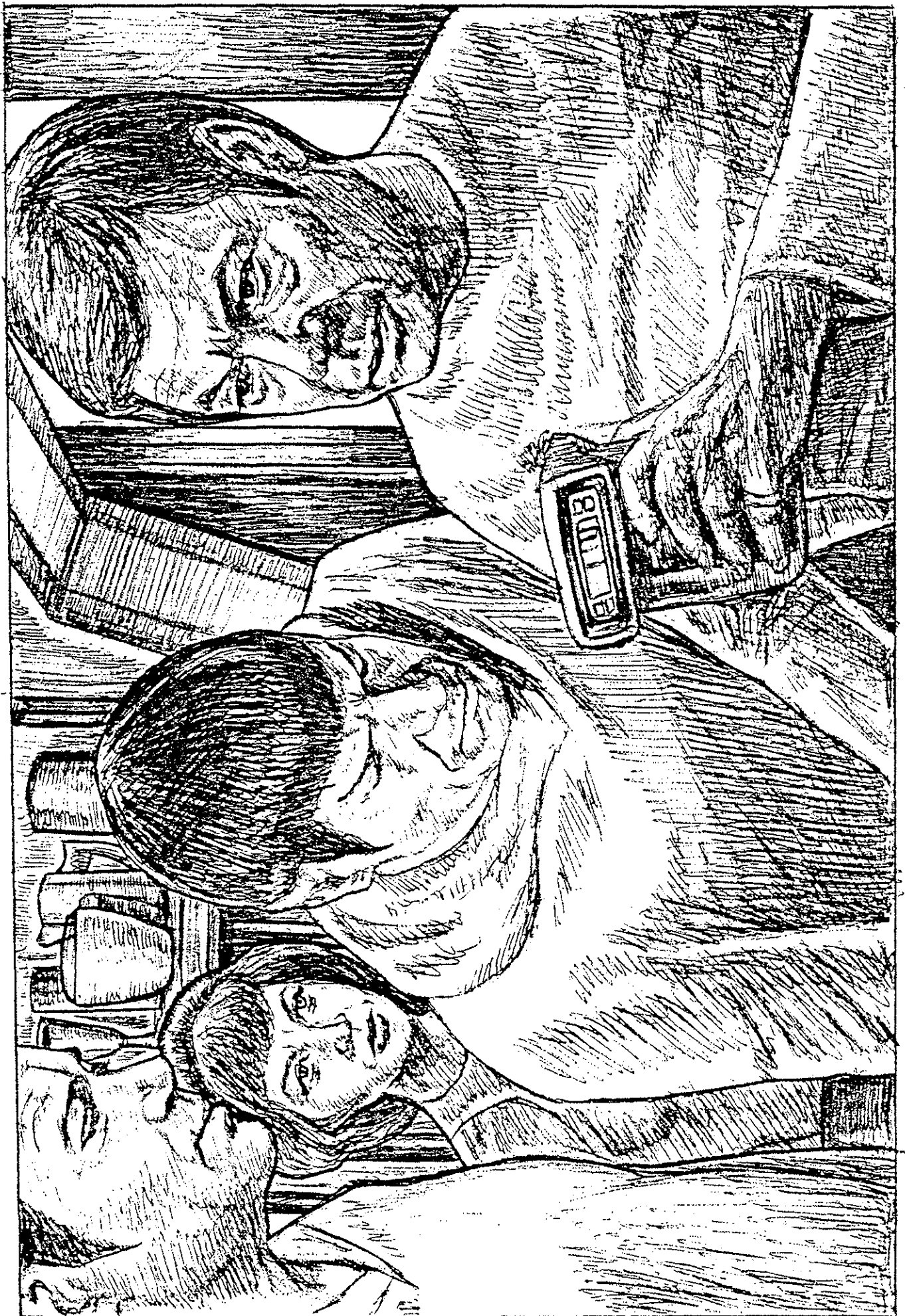
"I think it is. I've remembered what the tutor said. Please, try and think. Any little sound. Maybe very faint or far away."

"There were sleigh bells. When I'd got him back to the trundler I was debating whether to risk going and getting his bag, but the sleigh bells were coming nearer so I got us out of there before anyone saw him. The bag's still there, on the lawn."

"That's it. Only they weren't sleigh bells. They were wedding bells. They are shaken at the wedding ceremony to aid the male to reach plak tow."

"We saw them work on Vulcan. Bones - those frameworks of little bells those two men shook."

"Yeah. They were damned effective, too. Spock went off the deep end after less than two minutes of them."



"You know, now I come to think of it, those bells might have been ringing for much longer, maybe fifteen minutes, before I consciously heard them. Spock would have been hearing them for far longer. His hearing is so acute."

"That's what I was trying to remember. The tutor said that a male fairly near his time but who was not quite ready to mate could be stimulated into the correct state by mental contact with his chosen partner and the use of certain sonic frequencies, usually produced by the bells. Once the buildup began, it could be accelerated. The more acceleration needed, the longer the period of stimulation would be - and the more severe the body trauma. That's how Vulcans swap marriage partners. They provoke pon farr to order. Of course, the males handling the bells - and the other ones with ceremonial roles in the ceremony - have to be just past their time, or they could be affected too."

"So Spock walked in on someone's wedding ceremony. Why didn't they warn him? They knew why he was coming to see them, that he was in buildup. Why didn't they warn him to stay away?"

"Because they wished me to be provoked."

Spock was leaning against the doorframe, shielding his eyes from the brightness in the kitchen. "Jo. Jim. I regret that I have had to embroil you in all this."

Kirk and McCoy reached him as his knees gave way. They carried him back to the cushions and settled him on them. Kirk leaned back against the chair and supported Spock across his lap. The Vulcan's eyes were closed and his face, bone white in the strong light of the kitchen, took false colour from the flames.

The two McCoy's passed scanners over him and consulted over the results.

"Are you still with us, Spock?"

"Yes, Leonard." The eyes stayed closed.

"You're still accelerating. Barely four hours left now."

Spock shivered and Kirk hugged him closer.

"My control is... non-existent. I will soon be totally irrational. The provocation has caused my body's normal functions to become unbalanced. I am not to be considered sane. I am not safe to be with."

Jo and Florence retreated towards the kitchen. McCoy stayed kneeling beside the pair on the rug. "Is there anything you wish us to do for you?"

"Yes. Do not allow me to cause harm to anyone."

Kirk, hesitant to cause more suffering to his friend but unable to ignore what seemed to be the obvious solution, asked, "Shouldn't we take you to the Refuge?"

The effect on Spock was electric. He arched away from Kirk, and without McCoy's intervention would have catapulted into the fire surround. The two men wrestled the Vulcan back onto the cushions where Kirk took a firmer grasp of him. Spock started to cry, and buried his face against his Captain's chest. They waited, horrified, awed and dismayed, for the emotional storm to subside.

"I will not go to the Refuge. I will not be used in this way. I will not let them use me." The words were spoken in a voice no longer precise and even.

"Who's trying to use you, Spock? Tell us," prompted McCoy.

"T'Pring... T'Pau... "

"Are they here? On Avalon?"

"T'Pring is at the Refuge. She called to me. We were linked once; she can still touch my mind. She has decided that it would be advantageous for her to become my consort, after all."

"So she's after you. It would have been better for her to have waited until you were safely inside the Refuge before she started to influence you," said Kirk.

"She 'started' before I beamed down, but I did not realise it then. Stonn is here too. He is marrying - is married to - T'Prilia who I thought was to have been my mate. It had been arranged by the Families. T'Pring used what he was experiencing to influence me. I had not considered the possibility that she could still touch my mind. She can. She is now. She awaits me at the Refuge. *I will not go to her.*" The last words were spoken in an agonised whisper.

Both men hugged the Vulcan between them, needing to tell him with more than words how they felt about him.

Jo spoke from the darkness beyond the firelit circle. "If you don't mate, you'll die insane. If you won't marry this T'Pring, is there anyone else who could help you at the Refuge?"

"No. There is none. They have lied to me." The voice held the bitter anguish of betrayal, the destruction of the belief in Vulcan values, tradition and society which had influenced Spock's every thought and deed in the long years of his 'exile'. "They have lied to me... and I have lied to you. I was commanded to marry and return to Vulcan to take up my place in the Family. The wedding ceremony was to have taken place in three days' time. I was not going to return to the Enterprise. I was too much a coward to tell you this, and say goodbye properly. I'm sorry."

Kirk was trying to accept this fresh information when McCoy asked in a deceptively neutral voice, "Does your mate have to be Vulcan? Or even female? I will not willingly lose you, my friend."

Kirk's head snapped up as the meaning of the doctor's offer exploded into his mind. "If Bones is not acceptable, I offer myself." Captain and C.M.D. locked eyes. "Or both of us," he continued, "if it is possible or necessary."

"Or me," said Jo. "I'd have a better chance than either of you."

"None of you would succeed." The voice was infinitely weary. "I would kill you in the madness of my necessity, and still remain insane. You are too frail."

"Amanda manages and Sarek survives."

"Amanda wishes to be with Sarek. They are linked, and she does have abilities that you all lack. She is a touch-telepath of a very high order. Her mental skills enable her to deflect Sarek's full strength and still provide him with all he needs."

"Then use the meld and link with me as you have before," urged Kirk. "We'll manage."

"When the plak tow submerges my personality the link would channel the fever direct to you. You would go insane. You saw what happened to me; do you think that I could allow that to happen to you? Besides, T'Pring is already influencing me. She cannot establish the bond link without my consent and active co-operation, but she has done enough to ensure that I cannot be fulfilled by any now save her."

The sound of Spock's ragged breathing echoed around the room. Finally, Florence said, "I know it really is none of my business, but how did you survive last time? If this T'Pring was supposed to marry you, what prevented it? Who did you marry?"

Spock remained silent; Kirk supplied the answer.

"She challenged the marriage. She was allowed to by right and custom, although no-one had done so for centuries. People usually co-operate and get other partners.

"T'Pring was supposed to challenge and nominate her chosen mate, Stonn, to be her champion. Then he and Spock were supposed to fight each other for the right to possess her. The survivor would get her."

"So Spock fought for her. This Stonn is still alive - he just married Spock's arranged bride. How come?"

"T'Pring changed the game plan. She chose me as her champion. A very logical choice, as she kindly explained to Spock after the fight. Spock and I fight. If Spock loses, I wouldn't want her and she gets Stonn. If Spock wins and keeps her he'd have to leave Vulcan to face charges for the murder of his commanding officer and Stonn would still be available to her; or he could reject her, in which case Stonn would still get her. Even if I won and kept her she'd still win because I'd face charges for Spock's murder. Nice. T'Pau, Spock's grandmother, was officiating at the ceremony, and she co-operated with them in arranging for it to happen. She knew all about it - though I've never been sure just why she plotted against her grandson. The inclusion of Stonn in the bride's marriage party actually proclaimed to them all what was going to happen, but nobody did anything to prevent it."

"I don't understand. You're both still alive. Spock didn't kill you."

"I tried. I tried very hard. I would have. Leonard cheated." Spock sighed, hidden from the two women by the bodies of his t'hy'lae. "I thought for a while that I had."

"What did you do, Dad?"

"Told T'Pau that Jim should have a tri-ox injection to even the balance of the contest, then slipped him a delayed-action neural paralysar instead."

"I got groggy during the fight and passed out. Went into a coma. Spock thought I was dead."

"I never did apologise for doing that to you, did I, Spock?"

"It was necessary. I do not like to contemplate what I nearly did; what I tried to do. I do not want to run the risk of doing it again."

Kirk nudged McCoy and mouthed, "Phaser in jacket."

McCoy nodded. "I need to get something from my kit. It's in the kitchen. Won't be a minute."

He eased Spock into Kirk's arms and rose stiffly to usher Jo and Florence into the kitchen. As soon as the door closed behind them, Jo started talking.

"Dad, this process of accelerating pon farr only works safely if both partners fully consent to the procedure. Spock clearly doesn't, and the whole thing is out of control. He's literally burning up. The acceleration should be spread over several days - as much as two or three weeks - not jammed into a single day."

"I figured as much. Listen to me carefully, and no arguments, please. You two are to stay out here. You are not to go back into the room under any circumstances. No matter what you hear - you stay put!"

He rummaged in his kit and found the hypo he had prepared three weeks before. He checked the contents label carefully, then raised his eyes to meet his daughter's terrified gaze.

"Be careful. That's poison!"

"I know it's poison." He reached into the pocket of Kirk's discarded jacket. "And this is a phaser."

"Why? What are you going to do to him?"

"Unless we get a miracle in something less than three hours, I'm going to do what Spock has asked me to do. I'm going to commit a murder."

"Dr. McCoy - you cannot do that."

"Dr. Rood - I am going to do that. If Jim or I don't kill him when he goes insane, he'll rape and kill anybody who gets in his way. This is only his second time, and the first was bad enough. This one will be immeasurably worse. I've seen him when he was crazy. Nobody will be able to stop him - I doubt that even a Vulcan would be able to stand against him. Please believe me. Stay. Out. Here."

"There must be something we can do. Some other way to deal with this!"

"T'Pring's got the whole thing sewn up tight, doubtless with more than a little help from T'Pau. Spock either mates with her, which he does not want to do; or he tries it with one of us, which kills us as well as him; or we kill him and take the consequences. If you can think of a fourth alternative before we have to do that, tell us."

He closed the door gently.

Jo and Florence sat in the kitchen, talked of alternatives and ideas, and wept on each other's shoulders.

McCoy returned to the fireside and handed Kirk his phaser. He sat down and took his share of Spock's weight. The Vulcan lay, limp and heavy, between them, his control not quite gone, but the facade he had maintained so carefully burned away by the savage acceleration of the mating urge. By trying to deny T'Pring he had fought against his body - and had lost. His body was now consuming itself in the effort to produce the genetic material that the mating urge demanded of it.

Time crept on.

The door from the kitchen opened and a shaft of light illuminated the still scene before the fire. Jo, silhouetted in the glare, tiptoed hesitantly towards the fire.

"Dad."

"Yes, Jo?"

"This maybe a dumb question. How did Spock get away with not marrying T'Pring the first time?"

"She challenged."

"I know that. Why didn't he marry her after the fight was over?"

"He didn't want to."

"Couldn't we arrange the same sort of thing again? Faking it and cheating, I mean."

"Regrettably, no," Spock's voice replied raggedly. "I still know what happened last time, so I would instinctively expect it could happen this time. I would know. Such a deception would only work if I didn't know what was happening."

"Your personality would be submerged. If we waited until you were no longer aware?"

"The memory would still be there. It wouldn't work."

"I'm sorry. It was just a suggestion we thought might help." She went back into the kitchen and the light went out.

Spock began shivering.

Kirk was startled by a sudden surge of desire. His pulse rate rocketed, he gasped for breath, and he became aware that he was totally, thoroughly aroused.

McCoy shook his head, trying to clear his mind of the sensations he was experiencing. *I will not think that. She is my daughter! I cannot, must not, allow myself to feel this for her. Not for her!*

Heart pounding, he slowly fought his errant body. His vision cleared and he saw that Kirk was lost in the need of the moment. He grasped Kirk's shoulder and shook him as viciously as he could, trying to catch his attention.

"Fight it, Jim! Spock's shields have gone. He's broadcasting to us and getting it all back - closed circuit. Control yourself, or let him go!"

Reality was far away from Kirk, but he dimly heard what McCoy said and edged his way back out of the erotic visions which had overwhelmed him. Marginal sanity claimed him again. The world seemed vast and empty and cold. "How?" he gasped through cracked lips.

McCoy took a firmer grasp on Spock, finally understanding fully what was happening to them. "It's Spock. He's linked to us, his t'hy'lae. We stand with him - close friends, brothers by choice, lovers sharing his love. Trusted to help him keep control. The desire was his response to

Jo. This cuddling and the weeping in the kitchen were all our responses to Spock broadcasting those emotions he has never been fully able to admit to having. He needed bodily contact, so we gave it to him. Try to think calm thoughts, happy ones, peaceful. He'll pick them up from us. It'll help for a while."

Kirk, panting too hard to spare breath to answer, nodded. He thought back to his childhood; to the summer when he was six and the whole world was golden-bright and new. Swimming in the creek and playing with Sam and their dog. The incredible summer when their father had returned to spend with them five wonderful, unending weeks of happiness.

Spock's shivering finally eased and Kirk relaxed enough to look around for McCoy. The doctor had released Spock into Kirk's arms and was now sitting a little removed from them; watching them closely.

"Bones?"

"Keep him quiet, Jim. I almost had an idea. Something that Jo said..."

"We can't fight him." It was a bald statement.

"No, it wasn't that." He snapped his fingers. "No, it wasn't Jo. It was Spock. Spock said it, about Jo's suggestion. 'The memory would be there.'" His voice rang out gladly. "He said it. That's what we've been looking for. That's the other possibility! It will work."

McCoy grabbed Spock back again, lifting him out of Kirk's grasp and settling him firmly into the circle of his own arms. "Listen to me, Spock. You chose us as t'hy'lae - to help you. To stand with you. Listen to me now."

Spock did not respond, but Kirk knew that the hope which had flared within him was the echo of his friend's emotion. He shuffled closer, resting one hand on Spock's shoulder and draping the other one around McCoy.

"We're listening."

Startled from his intense scrutiny of Spock's face, the doctor looked up, grinned, and, taking a very deep and shaky breath, began his verbal attack.

"The fourth possibility. The one that is left if you reject mating with T'Pring or Jim or Jo or me or letting us kill you. The fourth possibility is you. The last time - when you went to Vulcan - it was a tremendous strain on you. You detested what was happening to you, tried not to think about it afterwards, and because we are t'hy'lae to you and linked, we didn't think too much about it either. You didn't want us to. We mirrored what you felt then, just as we are doing now. For Vulcans the link wouldn't be noticeable, but we've had no training to improve our natural shields. If we - I - had thought about what had happened, we might not be in this situation now.

"T'Pring challenged you. And then she picked Jim to be her champion. You tried to stop the ceremony because you knew what was going to happen. You tried and you failed. You thought that you had killed Jim; you believed it. You felt grief, remorse, shame; and I didn't help you. I picked up those feelings from you, and I reacted angrily. Your t'hy'lae deserted you; one who accepted the challenge to fight you and die by your hand, the other rejecting you because you had killed his friend."

Kirk felt the emotional storm rise within him. Disbelief at McCoy for saying those words that so vividly brought back those unendurable memories; terror for what was to come. He tried to project reassurance.

"Listen to him. You chose him as you chose me. You trusted him then. Trust him now - as I trust him."

"Jim and I beamed back up to the ship. Then you joined us. You were back to normal. I asked what had happened to the girl and you said that after the combat was over you'd found that you had forgotten about her. Spock, *listen* to me. Very, very carefully. You gave her to Stonn because you no longer needed to mate with her. Not because you didn't want her - because you didn't *need* her. The tremendous strain of experiencing your first pon farr, of trying to get to Vulcan, fighting Jim and 'killing' him and my deserting you when you most needed my support, all built up until you rejected T'Pring. You no longer *needed* to mate with her."

Kirk's eyes were beginning to blur. He was having difficulty breathing, his chest was on fire and he was soaked in sweat. McCoy, breathing heavily, shook sweat from his eyes.

"We can't recreate what happened then. You said it - you said that you would remember. That the memories are still there. Use them, Spock! Use that tremendous brain of yours! Dig out those memories and look at them. They are what happened. You can't ignore them any longer. *Look at them.* Analyse them. Find out exactly why and how your body decided to end the plak tow before you mated with T'Pring. Your body is still dependent on your brain. You still have control of it. *Keep control of it.* Use that control now. Dig out that reason - the way it was then. Why it ended. How it ended. Make your body do it again. Do you hear me? *Make your body do it again!*"

McCoy stopped because he no longer had breath to speak with. His world contracted until the only thing left in it was the need to fill his lungs, to breathe in and out, to give his starved body the oxygen it desperately needed.

When the world expanded again, he found that he was lying beside Spock on the cushions. His body ached, his head throbbed and he was parched. He moved feebly and was immediately supported by cool hands which offered him water. He drank thirstily.

"Please, lie still, Dad. You're running a very high fever. You mustn't strain yourself. Just relax."

"Spock?" The word was just recognisable.

"Fever. Higher than yours is. Erratic heartbeat. Breathing irregular. The readings on the mediscanner are truly awesome, but he's still with us. Jim is about the same as you are, but he's still out cold."

McCoy raised himself wearily onto one elbow, resolutely ignoring the tremendous shudders as his muscles tried to support his weight. Spock's face was composed, and so pale that the blood vessels beneath the skin could be seen clearly. He looked thinner and more frail than McCoy could remember seeing him. McCoy knew that within that delicate shell the fires of hell were burning, seeking to consume not only Spock, but all he had ever cared for.

Grinning, he said, "He's still with us. Still transmitting, but Lord, how he is trying. How much did you hear?"

"All of it," said Florence. "We turned out the light and left the

door open."

She was seated beside Kirk, gently bathing his face with cool scented water. Kirk was delirious, moaning and mumbling too softly for the words to be understood, moving fretfully against the rugs which now covered the three of them.

"The fever is Spock's. You and Jim are mirroring it, just as you mirrored his reactions to all of this. Spock is trying to turn it off," said Jo. She caught her father as his strength failed and eased him back onto the cushions. "We heard you tell Spock. We do understand."

"If he fails... "

"We're prepared. We've got the phaser and the poison, but we won't be needing them. He won't fail, Dad."

Florence leaned forward and placed a defiant kiss on Spock's forehead. "He won't fail. He's come this far. Look out of the window."

McCoy dragged his eyes open and looked at trees illuminated in morning sunlight. "Morning? But... we hadn't reached midnight!"

"The plak tow should have started about five and a half hours ago. It didn't. The build-up has stopped."

Leonard McCoy relaxed into the joy and wonder that welled up inside him. "We can do it, Spock! Keep going. We can win! It's Christmas Eve... "

He plunged back into the flame-streaked darkness to seek out his friends.

Jerry Weston was showing his best form. The Christmas Day Ball, given by him, the Admiral in charge of Starfleet Academy, was turning out to be a highly successful affair indeed. Humans of all shapes, sizes, colours and planets of origin had gathered to celebrate the promise of peace and goodwill to all men; only now they extended the promise to include all living beings. They chatted, ate, drank, reformed into other groupings, laughed, danced and generally did what Humans at parties normally did. They enjoyed themselves. To make things even better, a large number of people of non-Terran descent had come to the party.

For many cultures, the concept of 'party' was unknown before the eruption of the boisterously extrovert, garrulous Terrans into the unsuspecting cosmos. The non-Terrans had attended the gatherings called 'party' in an attempt to understand what happened at those occasions. The explanations given by the Terrans themselves had only served to confuse them, so they came to see for themselves. Once experienced, the attendees tended to talk about 'party' to their own kind of people, who, puzzled by what they were told, attended 'party' when they were invited. The idea was catching on. Twenty seven different species were present at the Westons' party, and it was swinging - in one section of the main Recreation Hall, quite literally, from a chandelier that Weston had had specially reinforced. One must cater for the tastes of all possible guests.

Weston circulated, a glass of water with a twist of lemon floating in it firmly clutched in his hand, and acted as a good host did at a successful party. A small portion of his mind was constantly occupied with the worry of what was occurring in Dr. Rood's house.

The security team had confirmed that all five of the people he thought were inside were actually there. A close watch had been kept, but without using the snooping devices which would have recorded every word spoken inside the house. Weston had forbidden their use, much to the anger of his Security Chief, who had left muttering about doing a good job with both hands tied behind her back and her right foot inserted in her left ear. Movement had been seen inside the house, the curtains had opened and closed, and the lights had dimmed and brightened, but nobody had signaled for help, so the security people had not attempted entry. His Chief was very annoyed with him, which was not a good situation. He'd have to think up a very good explanation for her, or he could simply tell her that the house had held a very sick Vulcan. He damned Kirk to perdition again, seethed, and practised patience and his best smile.

The party gathered momentum around him.

The Security Chief casually approached Weston and told him that some people had left Dr. Rood's house and had come to the party. A body count had shown five persons. Weston heaved a relieved sigh, and muttered the fact about a sick Vulcan. The Chief's comments about her Admiral's penchant for complicating any situation out of all recognition brought a delighted smile to his face and two new curses to his already extensive repertoire.

Weston thanked her, and started looking. He finally spotted Jo and Florence standing at the edge of a flying balcony that overlooked the main assembly area.

"Good afternoon, Doctor, Doctor. Glad you could come. Are you enjoying yourselves?"

Both women turned, startled by the hail. Jo recovered first.

"Good afternoon, Admiral. We've only just arrived. Everyone does seem to be having a good time."

Florence smiled and added her mite. "I think this is going to be one of the best Christmas Balls yet. You've certainly drawn them in."

"We try. Had a few bad moments. The Christmas Tree was a bit of a disaster. All the leaves fell off."

"It looks okay from here." Jo looked appreciatively at the tall, beautifully decorated spire below them. "One of the best I've seen."

"That's not my own. I borrowed it from the Enterprise. Scotty arranged it. Jim was with you, I believe? Is he here?"

"Ah, yes. Sorry about poaching your guest. He's staying with me for a few days."

"Oh?" said Weston, innocently noting the glances between the two. "Been having fun?"

"Well... It's definitely been interesting," said Jo.

"You might even say fascinating," said Florence. "But then again, you might not."

"I'm glad you resisted that particular temptation. Where is he?"

"They went to find the bar," replied Jo, and waved in the direction of the lower terrace.

Weston walked to the balustrade and looked down, searching for a familiar figure. "I see Jim, just to the left of the tree. Satan's toenails! He's got Spock with him. And a Vulcan girl - what a beauty! Vulcans at a Christmas party. Age of miracles! Twenty eight races..." Weston's triumphant chortle trailed away as he became aware of the tension in the two women who were staring at the scene below. He paid more attention to the tableau.

Spock, amazingly thin and elegant in full dress uniform and all his decorations, was standing frigidly upright, his hands clenched behind him. As they watched, McCoy joined Kirk to flank the Vulcan. The attack-defence postures of the two men looked incongruous with their dress uniforms. Facing the three was the Vulcan girl. They were talking.

"I give thee greeting, Spock. I have been awaiting thee."

"Indeed?" The right eyebrow rose a fraction of a millimeter.

"Do thee still call these Humans t'hy'lae?"

"I do."

"Then it is fitting that they are here with thee. Thee and I have certain matters to discuss."

"I cannot think of any matter that I have to discuss with you."

"Indeed?" T'Pring's right eyebrow rose a fraction, mocking Spock's normal gesture. Kirk's expression became murderous. McCoy suddenly showed teeth. "Stonn is married to the Lady T'Prilia."

"I have sent them my greetings."

"Thee will require an alternative."

"Why?"

T'Pring gazed calmly back at the man before her. The Humans were displaying strong emotions, anger, frustration, and - perhaps - hate. Spock was glacial in his control. She complimented herself on her choice. He was controlling the fires well.

"I felt thee at the refuge. I called to thee and thee heard me. I awaited thee. Why did thee not come to me?"

"There was no need."

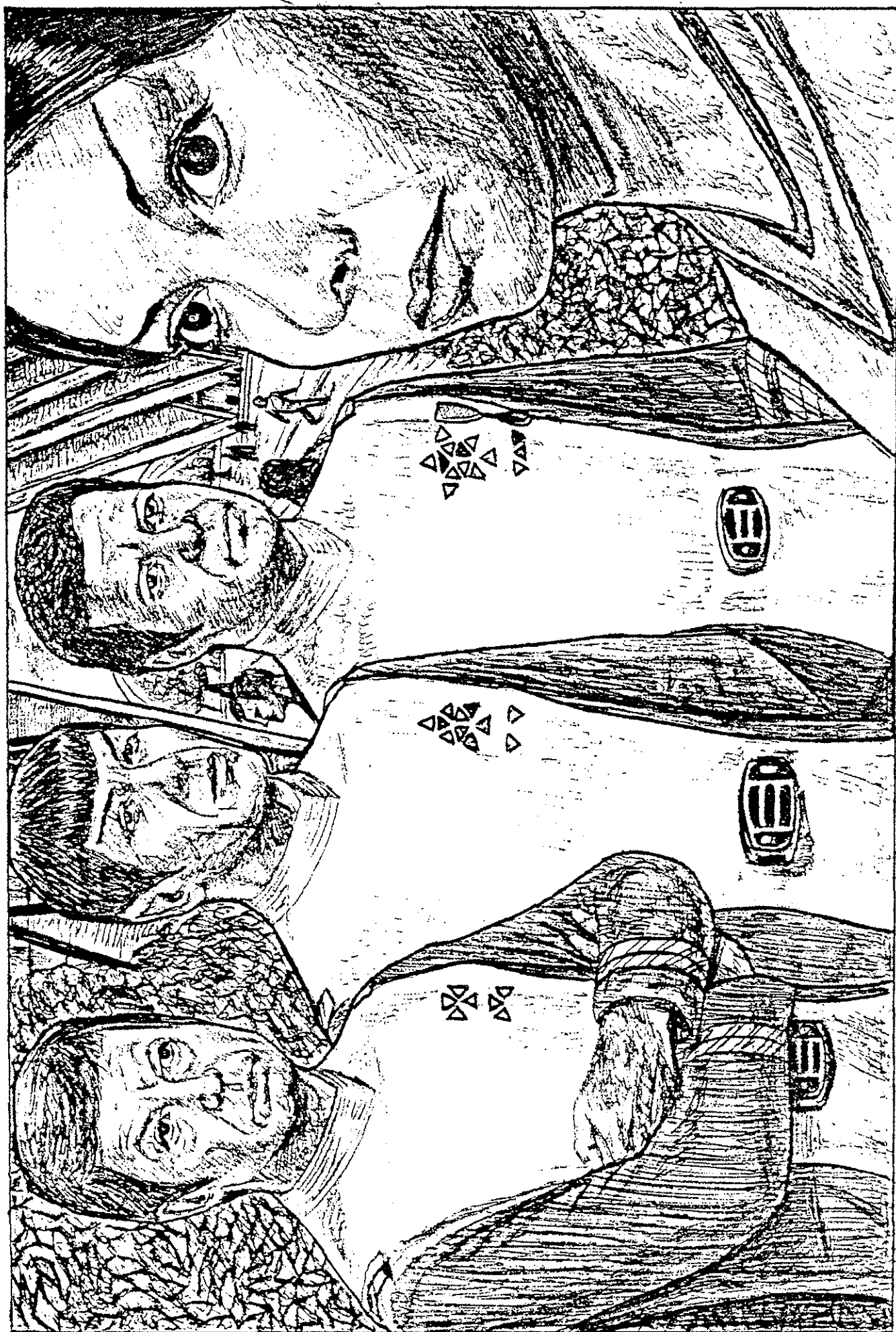
The perfect features of the girl did not alter. "There *is* need, Spock. Thy need. That is why thee contacted thy Family. Why thee came here to T'Prilia."

Spock remained silent.

"I know thy mind too well, Spock. Were not thee and I bonded to the linking at seven? I heard thee at the Refuge. Thy time is come again. Thee burn. T'Prilia and Stonn have chosen to marry, leaving me free again. For thee."

"I have no need of you."

"Do thee think to find another here for thee? There is none. I was



most careful. There is none here that could mate with thee and survive, and thee will not cause death so that thee may live. Therefore thee must come to me."

"And if I choose my own death instead?"

"To dishonour thy Family by denying thy heritage before all? Even thee could not do that, Spock."

Kirk and McCoy flicked glances at each other but held their peace and watched T'Pring.

"There are no other possibilities."

"Incorrect. There are always possibilities. The fact that they are not yet known does not preclude their existence."

"So thee has always maintained. And whilst thee searches for thy other possibility, will thee dare to enter the plak tow amongst thy... friends? Have thee thought of the dangers involved in such an occurrence then?"

"I am in no danger of entering plak tow."

Something awoke in T'Pring's eyes at that bald statement. Sensuously, daring his t'hy'lae to interfere, she reached out one slender, perfect finger and trailed it down the side of Spock's face, then traced the jawline delicately.

All three saw disbelief, then fear, flame in her face. "Thee are not! But... I heard thee. I felt thee answer me! Who hast thee cleaved to?"

"You have no right to question me. You have no call on me. You forwent all rights when you challenged."

"How can thee avoid the fire? It is not possible. Thee reacted to my call at the Refuge."

"You were mistaken. It is to be expected, under the circumstances."

T'Pring slumped. Her face still wore the appearance of control and revealed nothing, but every line in her body registered her defeat.

"What shall I do now? Now that thee has rejected me?"

"Go back to T'Pau and tell her you failed to ensnare me. She may have other duties which you can perform for her."

"May I tell T'Pau when thee will present thy chosen wife to the Family?"

"I have no wife, nor any need of one now. There is much to be said for having Humans as t'hy'lae. Especially when they are such as these."

He gestured to the men flanking him. Kirk and McCoy had relaxed when it became obvious to them that T'Pring was not able to provoke Spock; now they straightened. Catching the innuendo, both grinned at the proud woman before them. McCoy met her eyes squarely, and from somewhere deep inside produced a knowing, confident acknowledgement of the question she so clearly wished to ask. Kirk met her eyes and to his lasting amazement, blushed furiously, knowing what she was thinking.

The glare recentred on Spock. "Thee has found thy other possibility."

I wish thee - all - comfort in it. Health and long life to thee and to thy chosen ones, Spock." She made the Vulcan salute.

Spock's hands remained clenched behind his back. "I bid you safe journey."

She whirled from them and left, her abrupt departure causing a ripple through the party throng as she passed.

In the secluded area beside the tree, Spock's shoulders bowed as uncontrollable relief surged through him. He was only vaguely aware of Kirk and McCoy supporting him to a chair and the warble of the mediscanner, followed by the all-too-familiar hiss of a hypo. His vision cleared and he lifted his head to face his vastly amused friends. McCoy broke first, command training giving Kirk the edge in self-control.

"Forgive me if I'm wrong, but I think you just intimated to T'Pring that Jim and I are your lovers."

"I did."

McCoy gulped, then swallowed again. Kirk finally managed to ask, in a rather strangled voice, "Why?"

"It is regrettable, but I find that I am Human enough to feel the need for revenge."

"And that was revenge?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, it was. For any Vulcan woman to be told that a provoked male could prefer another male is bad enough, but to be told that one whom she has provoked has turned for partnership to not one, but two males, and of another race, is a tremendous insult. Even infinite diversity must have some limits." Slight colour washed over his too-pale face. "She will go and tell T'Pau that I have taken you both as mate. T'Pau will cause me to be summoned to Vulcan to give account of my behaviour. Before the Council of my Family I will speak the truth of what has happened here so that all will hear it. That I came here to Avalon to marry the Lady T'Prilia and return with her to Vulcan, as the council ordered that I should; as the agreement between our Families stated that it should be. That T'Prilia broke custom by marrying Stonn without my consent. That T'Pring provoked me without my consent. That thee both combined to free me from the bondage of the pon farr; and I shall detail how. A method which is open only to me; caused by the machinations, past and present, of T'Pau and T'Pring."

Kirk chortled. "I'd really like to see the non-expression on T'Pau's face when she realises that she has caused you to become the first Vulcan male in all of time to be free of female influence over the choice of marriage partner. In fact, to be free of the need to have a marriage partner. I can almost pity T'Pring's next husband. He will be in for one hell of a time."

"I doubt that she will acquire one."

McCoy sniffed, still taking readings of Spock's condition, and surreptitiously signalling Kirk to keep Spock seated. He received an equally secretive acknowledgement before he replied, "Even with T'Pau's patronage - sorry, matronage?"

"Even with that advantage, no man will take her."

"Why not?" queried Kirk.

"Women can survive the pon farr unmated. It is unpleasant, but with the medical assistance now available, it can be accomplished without lasting harm. Males, as you know, cannot. The custom of mate provision is the only safeguard men have. Could you trust your life to one such as T'Pring?"

"No. But then we know what she is capable of. Others will not."

"The Families of any unbonded males inquire most closely into the history of any unmated female. Not all Families are like mine, with an unscrupulous matriarch. Few Families, however desperate, will allow one of their men to be allied to her."

"Are you sure that they will notice?"

"Yes." Spock gazed into the distance, across time and space to his homeland. "Thee remembers the challenge? When T'Pau asked T'Pring if she were prepared to become property rather than wife?"

"You think we *could* forget that?"

Spock shrugged slightly, conveying a non-verbal apology. "By issuing the challenge and accepting freely that condition, she forwent the status of wife. In fact, she forwent the status of citizen. She was property from that instant onwards, owned by Stonn because I gave her to him."

"By all of custom, if one of a mated pair wishes to take a different partner at the next time, he or she must gain the agreement of the current partner and also provide that partner with another acceptable and willing mate. If no alternative partner is provided, then the existing partnership must be maintained - unless a challenge is issued."

McCoy saw what Spock was trying to say. "And now T'Pring isn't married and Stonn is, to someone else."

"Thus revealing that she was not wife, although she lived as his wife, behaved as his wife, bore his child and was treated by all as his wife. It was widely known that she was to be my wife, and I am regarded as a subject of some interest."

"Almost a legend," supplied Kirk smugly.

"Since my departure from Gol, the 'legend' has become slightly more than 'almost'. The fact that she challenged me and chose you as champion was suppressed. The idea of an Outworlder so used was considered not to be acceptable to Vulcans in general, particularly so visible a personage as yourself. The fact that she 'married' Stonn instead of me was undeniable, however no-one asked how this was accomplished. Privacy would not permit such inquiries to be made from merely idle curiosity."

"She's trapped. T'Pau can't act openly against you without revealing that she and T'Pring - and Stonn and T'Prilia - have broken just about every custom and tradition there is to break. I wonder how the Council is going to logic this little mess under the carpet."

"That will be their problem. I believe that the full tale of T'Pring's challenge will still be kept secret. It will be as unacceptable now as it was then. It will be known to all that she did challenge, because the fact that she was and is property and never wife will now be undeniable. There will be much conjecture in that I caused no reported death, and still am obviously alive and in good health."

"And unmated," interjected Kirk slyly.



"Doubtless the logical assumption will be reached that my unmarried status can be accounted for by my mixed parentage."

"The matter of your 'good health' is also an assumption, although not logically arrived at," McCoy said acidly.

"Compared to my condition yesterday, I am in good health, and I will be better tomorrow than I am today. When T'Pring challenged me, she could not lose. Now she has forfeited all she gained. Stonn is free of her. I am free of her. Her son will be raised by Stonn and T'Prilia, because property has no rights of parentage. She has even lost the right to have a name.

"T'Pau will not be able to arrange another husband for her because nobody will risk himself to unwanted property. She faces the rest of her life alone, and it will not be pleasant, that solitariness, surrounded by all she ever desired and forever barred from attaining any of it again. I am revenged."

A small part of his mind wondered about T'Pau's reasons for promoting first the challenge and then the marriage of Stonn to T'Prilia, but it was only a small part and it found that it really didn't care if it never found out.

He stood, rather shakily but with great determination, exalting in the feeling of completeness, of wholeness. He had all of his tomorrows before him to spend where and with whom he chose. He stretched out a hand to each of his t'hy'lae and they clasped them in their cool, moist hands.

"It is over. And - we are supposed to be finding the bar, gentlemen."

Kirk whooped with laughter and joy, and McCoy wagged a finger and happily began scolding his friend.

High above on the balcony, Jo and Florence hugged each other and wept for joy as they saw it. Weston, consumed with curiosity, offered handkerchiefs and questions.

"Please forgive us, Admiral," said Jo, sniffing. "Spock has been ill, and it's now apparent that he has recovered fully. We are just so very relieved that he is going to be all right."

"We were so worried, you see."

"What was wrong with him?"

"Can't say. Privileged information. Sorry."

"Dr. Rood?"

"Funny, I can't seem to remember a damned thing. It must be old age catching up on me."

Weston snorted, a delicately balanced blend of irritation and annoyance, and went on his way, privately determining to badger Jim Kirk for an explanation at the first opportunity. The two doctors watched as the trio slowly approached the bar, their progress impeded by many friends. An old song, practically pre-space and learned in her now-distant youth suddenly popped into Florence's head. She hummed a verse quietly. The words of the song fitted what had been happening beautifully.

She'd have to teach it to Jo - some time.

'The problem is all inside your head,' she said to me.
'The answer is easy if you take it logically.
I'd like to help you in your struggle to be free.
There must be fifty ways to leave your lover.'

She said, 'It's really not my habit to intrude,
Furthermore I hope my meaning won't be lost or misconstrued,
So I'll repeat myself, at the risk of being crude,
There must be fifty ways to leave your lover -
Fifty ways to leave your lover.'